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VELVET BILL UTTERED NO MOAN—ONLY STOOD THERE IN SILENT GRIEF.

Buffalo Bill's Quandary;

OR,

VELVET BILL'S VOW.

A Romance of Strange Life on Mountain and Plain, and Companion Story to Go-Won-Go the Red-skin Rider.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

BURIED ALIVE.

UNMINDFUL of danger, a man sat before a camp-fire built in the very entrance to a cavern, and was engaged in greedily counting over a quantity of gold, fresh dug from the mines, paper money and valuables which lay before him upon a bright red blanket.

The scene was a strange one, yet picturesque, for it was a rocky vale in the midst of a small island along the shores of which swept a foaming torrent, the murmur of the waters seeming like a soothing lullaby to lure to rest.

On either side of the spacious cavern lay the evidence that it was more than a temporary camp, for there were several pack-saddles, cooking utensils, blankets and rifles, with saddles, bridles and lariats here and there.

A short distance down the valley was another camp-fire among the shelter of the rocks, and here these men were gathered.

One of these was a person of majestic presence, bearded heavily and with long hair falling upon his shoulders.

He gazed into the fire like one whose mind wandered far away from the scene, and his feet were seen to be heavily manacled.

Near him was a man also in irons, whose face was all that was evil, while the third one of the group was free and sat smoking a handsome pipe, and his face, too, was vicious and reckless.

Half a dozen horses were grazing about in the valley, and these made up the picturesque scene—a lawless camp.

"Jingo Jim!" suddenly called out the man seated in the cavern counting his ill-gotten wealth, and in response the man who wore no irons arose and walked toward his chief.

That chief was a man to attract attention anywhere, for he was a handsome-faced, splendidly-formed fellow, under thirty-five, and with the look of one to do and dare anything in a bad cause.

He was dressed in black, top boots, slouch hat and spurs, while he wore a belt containing four revolvers, two on either hip, and these he had not put aside, though in camp.

The man whom he had called Jingo Jim put aside his pipe as he approached, and said with politeness, as though confident of addressing his superior:

"Well, Captain Moonlight, what can I do for you, sir?"

"I wish to talk with you, Jim. Sit there!" The man sat down upon a blanket, and the one addressed as Captain Moonlight said:

"I have here a small fortune in what I have taken in on the Overland Trail," and he pointed to the gold and money.

"It looks big to me, captain."

"Yes, it is considerable; but had that Red-skin Pony Rider not cut me out of robbing the army paymaster and his clerk, I would have secured as much more in one haul."

"Now, this road-agent business is good enough, but it is too risky."

"It is risky, sir."

"I nearly lost my life the other night when I held up Sunset Sam's coach, and found the lady aboard I told you of."

"It was her husband whom I mortally wounded, and he came out here to invest in mines."

"His wife came to see him die, and, I tell you, Jim, she was my own sister!"

"Ah, sir, the beautiful lady in whose house you made me go as butler, that you might rob her?"

"Yes, and what I got from her enabled us to kidnap from the asylum yonder mad miner, Jim."

"She was a lovely lady, sir, your sister."

"Oh, yes; but she is vastly rich and I very poor. She loved yonder mad miner, but he was poor, so she was forced to marry the rich man and that was what made her old lover a miner."

"Daniel Darwin was a good fellow, for he risked his life to save my sister and myself from drowning."

"That was the way we met him, and he fell in love with Lucita as she did with him; but, being poor, father and I sent him off to make a fortune while we married her to her present husband—a man over double her years, and who leaves her a wealthy widow through my shot."

"But to the object I have in view: That mad miner there, after all our trouble and expense

and risk to kidnap him and bring him here, will never regain his reason, I fear."

"No, sir, I do not believe he ever will."

"Then he is no use to us, and the Indian Pony Rider is."

"The Red-skin Rider, sir?"

"Yes."

"He is dangerous, sir, yet I cannot see that he is of any use to us."

"Well, he did not go as Pony Rider for money, but to rescue the mad miner there, who is his adopted father."

"He knows of the mine, if the miner, in his madness, has forgotten it, and if I can capture the Indian youth alive, then I shall, under threat to kill Daniel Darwin, force the secret from him."

"As it now is, it is supposed that I have a band of moonlighters to back me, no one suspecting that I am alone, with only you and that outlaw there in irons, and whose irons we must cut off in some way so as to have his aid since we rescued him."

"We have no flies, sir, as I said; but I will get some when next I go into the camps for provisions."

"Well, it must be soon; but now I intend to lie in wait for the Indian Pony Rider, capture him alive, and through his love for his adopted father there, force the secret of the mine from him."

"That mine will make us enormously rich, I am sure, and we must find it, so we will not have to risk so much by robbing on the trails."

"You have but to command me, Captain Moonlight, and I am with you in all things."

"I know that, Jim; but now go to bed, and to-morrow I shall take the trail of the Indian Pony Rider."

The man arose and departed, and the self-confessed outlaw leader, a man who held as a captive the mad miner, one who had saved his and his sister's life in the long ago, sat still, gazing avariciously at his stolen riches, unmindful that two persons had tracked him to his lair, landed upon his island retreat, and were then gazing upon him from the shadows of the rocks.

Another moment and the alarm came by a shot which brought down Jingo Jim, and Captain Moonlight found himself at bay in his cavern, his foes upon him.

But a frightened horse dashing by struck with his hoofs a keg of powder, rolling it into the fire, and a terrific explosion followed, shattering the entrance to the cavern in fragments and closing the entrance completely, while dashing forward came the two men who had tracked him to his retreat.

And standing there in the moonlight one of these two said:

"He is dead at last! If not, he is buried alive, for nothing that we can do could save him from that living tomb."

The speaker was the Indian Pony Rider of the Overland, and his companion was Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout in the disguise of a frontier parson.

CHAPTER II.

VELVET BILL.

A WILD, weird scene, the burial of a man who had come West to add to his riches by an investment in the crude mines where gold was found in handsomely paying quantities.

He had met his mortal wound at the hands of a road-agent, Captain Moonlight, and, borne to the cabin home of one known as Parson Prim, in the mining-camps—had, after a lingering illness, died, his beautiful young wife risking the hardships and dangers of the Overland Coach Trail to go to his side.

She had arrived in time to hear his last words, to know that she was left the sole inheritor of his great wealth, and she stood gazing down into the grave while Parson Prim recited the burial service with only regard and sympathy for the one who, though she had never loved, she had always respected and admired, and who had ever been to her a true and noble husband.

And among the crowd of miners who had gathered there about the grave, to show their respect for the beautiful woman alone in their midst, came a man whose appearance under other circumstances would have riveted every eye.

A tall, slender form, willowy, graceful, yet as strong as steel, clad in a velvet jacket of blue, a white silk shirt, with wide collar, turned down over a black scarf in which glittered a large ruby, a pair of white buckskin leggings, fringed and embroidered, stuck in top-boots armed with spurs, and a black slouch hat encircled by a chain of gold-pieces, the man was one to see and admire.

A hand of gold upholding four cards, aces, as a pin, upheld the rim of his hat in front, and gave to his face a bold, reckless air.

He was a blonde, wore a long silken mustache, curled up at the ends and the same hue as his golden hair, which fell upon the broad shoulders in waving masses.

Under his velvet jacket was a sash of red silk, and in it were a pair of revolvers and knife of rich workmanship.

His face was a study, with a look that betokened a communion with bitter memories in his quiet moments, yet a face to both fear and to trust.

He had ridden to the bottom of the spur on which stood Parson Prim's cabin, dismounted, and hitching his snow-white horse had ascended the trail to the scene of the burial.

The sound of men's voices, led by a clear, exquisite soprano, fell upon his ears, and he had halted in the shadow of the pines and stood with uncovered head gazing upon the solemn scene.

He did not move as the services ended and the miners turned from the grave, pausing by the beautiful young widow and silently offering a hand of sympathy, for they, poor fellows, knew not that her heart was not being buried in the grave with her husband.

Unnoticed by the miners the man in velvet remained in the shadow, and when at last the young widow had turned away and the dead was left in loneliness forevermore, he strode forward as one who seeks a sacred spot, and holding in his arms a vast bunch of wild flowers laid them respectfully upon the new-made mound.

His head was still uncovered, and his face wore a look of suffering, strange indeed for a man of his calling, for among the mining-camps, from Dismal City to Fort Venture, he was known as Velvet Bill, the Gambler Sport.

And yet the one in the grave held claim enough upon Velvet Bill to bring him to that spot and receive from him a silent tribute of regard—a tribute which the dashing, handsome gambler bestowed with a grief-stamped face and apparently anxious that no one should see.

As he stood there, hat in hand, gazing down upon that new-made grave, his lips were set and tears fell in silence from his dark-blue eyes.

Velvet Bill uttered no word or moan—only stood there in silent grief above the grave which held for him some strange secret to move him thus.

At last he turned slowly away, skirted the pines, avoiding the cabin where the young widow was, descended the trail, and regaining his horse rode across the level toward Miner's Roost.

The same respect which had caused the miners to go to the burial of the rich stranger, had been the means of closing the saloons in the mining-camps while the lovely widow remained in their midst, and groups of men standing about, beholding the gambler, began to discuss his coming into Miner's Roost at such a time.

"Velvet Bill gits no game on to-night, pard."

"No, he hev struck us at ther wrong time, fer they won't play a keerd this night in ther camp."

"Yer bet thar won't be no games, and Velvet Bill will hev ter wait until ther pretty widder takes Sunset Sam's coach East afore he kin git up a game."

"But he hain't goin' to ther Overland Lodge ter put up," and the last speaker attracted the attention of the others to the fact that Velvet Bill had ridden by the tavern, and not, as all expected he would, stopped to remain for the night as was his wont, for the gambler's home was at Jumping Off City, many miles further west upon the Overland Trail.

On he rode by the Overland Lodge, as the tavern was called in Miner's Roost, and to the surprise of all made no halt, spoke to no one unless addressed, and then replied only with a wave of the hand as he continued on his way.

What had brought Velvet Bill to Miner's Roost, all wondered.

No one had seen him standing apart at the burial, half-shielded among the pines, and no one had seen him go to the grave when the others had gone.

Yes, one had seen him go there.

This one was the beautiful young widow, who returned to the cabin and seated herself at the window commanding a view of the grave.

She had seen him creep almost stealthily from among the pines, and noted that he bore in his arms a large bouquet of wild flowers.

His tall form, splendid bearing and dress had attracted her attention, and then she had seen him place the wild flowers upon the grave of her husband, and stand there with uncovered head in silent respect, in apparent sorrow.

He could not have known her husband, for no one had met him there to know him, the parson had said.

At last the gambler turned away, walked a few paces, halted and looked back, like one who was leaving the grave of one dear to him, and then putting his hat on once more, strode rapidly down the trail leading to the camps.

She stepped to the door, saw him mount his horse and ride away, and then she asked the landlord of the Overland Lodge who was near:

"Who is that strange, that handsome man, sir?"

"Ah! it is Velvet Bill, ma'm. I had not noticed that he was here before."

"Who is Velvet Bill, sir?"

"The pluckiest and luckiest gambler in the mines, ma'm. true as steel to a friend, deadly as death to a foe, liked by all and feared, too, I may say, in spite of his free-and-easy way

"Ah! he is not going to stop to-night, I see, but goes on toward his home."

"I wonder what brought him here?"

"Did he meet my husband, sir?"

"No, ma'm, never saw him that I know of."

And so Velvet Bill rode on his way, all wondering why he had come to Miner's Roost, and the widow wondering more than all.

CHAPTER III.

NOT YET.

"YES, buried alive I am! At last my doom is sealed, and death has its icy grip upon me!"

So came the words, slowly, full of horror and despair, from the lips of the outlaw chief, Captain Moonlight.

He had been hurled by the explosion of the keg of powder far back into the cavern.

Half-stunned, shocked and bleeding from the cuts of the ragged rocks, he had staggered to his feet to find all blackness about him.

His ears ached and roared with the concussion, and at first he had believed himself fatally wounded.

But then he began to feel that his cuts were slight, no bones were broken, and he had not been more than badly shocked and shaken up.

A glimmer of light was before him, and he made his way there.

Then he paused, for he found the entrance to the cave closed by masses of rock shattered to fragments by the explosion.

Only one gleam of light crept into what he now began to feel was his tomb.

Without he heard voices, and the words of the Indian Pony Rider came faintly to his ears:

"He is buried alive, for nothing that we can do can save him from that living tomb."

Then came the words of the outlaw captain which open this chapter.

He was doomed, he felt certain.

A call to those without that he yet lived might end in his rescue in time.

But for what?

To hang for his crimes!

This thought, to him, was worse than dying there in the cavern, of starvation.

"I had my belt of arms on, but they have gone."

"But I can find them, and a bullet in my brain can end all when hunger begins to gnaw at my life," he said, grimly.

He dared not make a sound, fearing that he might be rescued—rescued, but to hang.

So he stood with his eyes upon that little gleam of light, as though it was all the world to him.

He heard indistinctly from without the sound of voices, the tramp of hoofs, yet he kept as still as death.

The night died away and the glimmer of sunlight appeared, causing a bright gleam to pierce that crevice in the rocks and lend a shadow of light only to the darkness of the cavern.

He waited and watched, and at last felt that his foes were departing from the island.

He heard them come near and discuss his death.

One said that the powder had killed him, and the other responded:

"Bitterly as I hate him it is better so, for I would not wish even that man to suffer such a torment as to die in that place for his tomb."

And this speaker was the Red Pony Rider, an Indian not wishing such revenge for his worst foe.

The entombed outlaw placed his ear to the crevice, and listening, heard the splashing of the waters as the horses, his own, were driven into the stream to swim down to safety beyond.

As the sounds died away and he knew that they were gone, he could scarcely restrain himself from uttering a cry of joy.

But he did laugh grimly, and then came the words through his shut teeth:

"Yes, they are gone and I am left to die."

Not a shadow of hope seemed then to fill his heart; but a moment after he broke forth with the words uttered with almost fierce joy:

"But I cheat the gallows, cheat them of their revenge in seeing me die!"

Then he sunk down upon the rocky floor of the cavern and yielded to his despair and grief.

He was faint, hungry and wretched.

He began already to know what suffering was, and to feel what anguish was to be his.

For a long while he remained thus, groveling upon the rocky floor in his anguish, moaning, cursing and at times uttering a prayer for life.

Suddenly he sprung to his feet with a wild cry.

"What! shall I die, I who have defied all fate, who have laughed at death time and again?"

"Shall I die, I whom they believed dead, they who have gone now believing me dead and themselves avenged?"

"No, I will not die without a desperate struggle for life."

"Yes, I will fight death inch by inch, hour by hour, minute by minute and only yield when despair alone has got its grip upon my heart."

"Ha! ha! ha! fiends, I am not dead yet."

"Yes, Captain Moonlight, Kit Quantrel, or whatever name you hate me by, yet lives if it be in this rocky tomb, yet hopes for revenge and defies death," and the outlaw chief laughed as a madman might in his fury.

But from despair he had soared to hope, and he began to grope about him in the darkness to find his belt of arms which he had lost when the explosion took place.

Upon hands and knees he crept over the rocky floor, feeling every inch of space, and at last uttered a shout as his fingers clutched the belt.

It was a broad belt containing four revolvers of large caliber, and a massive bowie-knife.

He felt the weapons and was glad to know that they still held their loads, as he had feared that the concussion might have exploded them.

Then he arose and followed the gleam of light.

It was a ray creeping through a crevice scarcely an inch in size.

He thrust his bowie-blade through it, and found the rock softer than he had believed it.

So he tied his handkerchief over his ears to deaden the sound, stood on tiptoe to prevent concussion, and aiming directly at the gleam of light, fired.

The report in that rocky cavern was terrible; but he saw that the large forty-four caliber bullet had knocked off a piece of rock so that he could have thrust his revolver through the opening, and again he yelled with delight and muttered the words:

"Not dead yet! no, not yet!"

Again he aimed at the rock, to one side of the opening, and pulled trigger.

As before, a piece of rock was broken off, enlarging the aperture, though very little more.

"I have twenty-two more shots, and then my good knife—"

"No, twenty-one shots yet, for one bullet must be kept for my heart if I cannot force my way out," he said, in a deep voice, that showed how he felt.

The third shot chipped off another piece of rock, and a fourth and fifth enlarged the aperture until he could thrust his hand through.

But night was coming on now, the gleam of light darkened, and he would not risk a shot that would not tell.

So he sunk down for a long night of mingled hope and despair.

At last the light brightened, and day came once more.

Hungry, faint and suffering he again opened fire.

Shot after shot was sent at the sides of the opening, chipping off the rocks until at last only two more bullets remained, one for the same use the others had been lent to, the last one to turn against himself if he failed to get out of his rocky tomb.

The opening was now nearly large enough to put his head through, and so he took good aim to do all the good he could with his twenty-third shot.

A yell broke from his lips as he saw that the shot had told better than all others, and springing to the hole, he cried:

"My faithful knife will do the rest now, and then I am free!"

"Not yet, not yet, does death triumph over me!"

CHAPTER IV.

TWO TRAILS TO FOLLOW.

WHEN the man striving so hard for life, sprung to see the effect of his last shot, he discovered that the hole was yet too small for him to crawl through.

He could hardly believe it until he had made the test, and which test had very nearly held him a prisoner, thus to die in the rock's embrace.

But he struggled loose and began to chip off with his knife pieces of rock.

The blade, the hilt, both were used, and slowly the work went on until daylight died and night came on once more.

Another long, dreary night, and yet hope filled his heart rather than despair.

Without food, and with only the bare rocks to sleep upon, his position was pitiful indeed, while his cut hands and head, his bruised body also added to his misery.

But the night passed on and once more the sunlight streamed through the aperture.

How different from the morning before when the space was so small.

And he set to work with a will until his knife-blade was worn away nearly to the hilt.

Then he searched for a piece of rock, and making of it a hammer would strike the knife hard on the hilt, thus chipping off piece by piece.

When at last the blade was gone, worn away, he began to chip the sides with the piece of loose rock he held.

"My God! must I pass another night in this tomb?" he groaned, as he saw how slow was his work.

"I am growing so weak, I have nothing more with which I can work, and I cannot stand this much longer."

"If it is another night, then it is forever, for this will be my grave."

Suddenly he started out of his despondency, seized one of his revolvers, took the barrel apart from the stock and used it as he had the knife, striking it hard with his rocky mallet.

He gave a shout of delight as he saw how well it served him, and worked for a couple of hours with renewed vigor and accomplishing much.

At last, as the sun's rays fell aslant, showing that it was near the horizon, he thrust his weapons through the aperture and began the test once more as to whether it was life or death for him.

He disrobed himself—for what cared he for scratches to his flesh if life could be saved!—and then he began the trial for life, the fight against death.

Then he also realized that his long fasting had served him well, for he had lost flesh, and this was in his favor.

It was a hard fight, to creep through that hole made in the rocks, after such a desperate fight against such odds; but at last he succeeded in getting through his head and shoulders.

Then, unmindful of the cuts along his bare body, unmindful of the wounds the jagged rocks made in his hips, the outlaw drew himself from death to life.

He fell in a heap upon the rocks, rolling down from the aperture upon the charred spot where had been the camp-fire, and there lay in a deathlike swoon.

It was just sunset when he returned to consciousness, and staggered to his feet.

Gazing about him, he beheld only the ruins of his camp, and near by was a camp-fire which he knew his foes had built, the log being still aglow.

Upon the ground were a few scraps of food, thrown aside, and these he seized and ate ravenously.

Then he rushed to the river and drank and drank until he feared his thirst would never be quenched.

But at last he turned away from the stream, and, walking back to the hole in the rocks, stood gazing upon it.

"My God! how did I ever get through there?" he mused aloud.

Then he saw that, had that gleam of light which had at first caught his eye shone through any other part of the rocks, he could never have forced his way out.

Only where he did get through were the rocks so thrown by the explosion of the powder as to enable him to dig through in safety.

Dressing himself, he roamed about the camp, to come upon a grave.

"Jingo Jim, poor fellow," he muttered to himself, as he halted by the grave.

"Well, had he aided me in forcing the secret of the mine from that madman, or, failing with him, capturing the Indian Rider and getting the secret from his lips, I would have killed Jingo Jim, for I will share with no one a fortune I may gain."

"Then, too, I had told him the secret as to who I was, and that the rich lady on the Hudson River whom he, as her butler, aided me to rob, was my sister, so I would have killed him."

"But the Indian Rider saved me the deed by killing him, he or that parson, whom I believe to be none other than Frank Powell the Surgeon Scout in disguise."

"Yes, he can never hide his eyes even behind spectacles, and I know the parson is none other than the Surgeon Scout, allied with Go-won-go the Red Rider to hunt me down."

"Yes, and right well they did it, too."

"But I am not dead yet, and the Indian Rider shall yet tell me the secret of this hidden mine."

"I live for revenge and gold alone now, and both I shall have to my heart's content."

"Alone, with no food, my revolvers unloaded, afoot in a wilderness, I yet was not spared from death in yonder rocky tomb to despair now."

"The past is behind me, the present with me and the future before me, and I shall fail at no obstacles, for gold and hate are the incentives and I will yet reach the goal I seek."

"Now to sleep, for what care I for gnawing of hunger now, after escape from the tomb?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" and the laugh was demoniacal, the laugh of a madman, it seemed so full of hatred, malice and joy commingled.

Throwing himself down upon the earth, where the grass formed a soft couch in comparison to the rocky bed of the few nights before, he sunk to sleep just as the shadows of night enveloped the scene.

He hardly moved through the long hours of the night, never once awoke, and with the coming of sunrise only sprung to his feet.

His face was white and haggard, his eyes deep sunken and a fever was upon him which sent him to the river to quench his thirst once more.

Then again he sought for food and he gave a shout of delight as he beheld a quarter of venison hanging in a tree where Jingo Jim had placed it to smoke, for the remains of a fire were under it.

"This is all I need now, and yonder log still burns, so I can cook all I need to eat."

"Die! oh, no! not yet, for there is work to be done, and I will do it though I am alone in a wilderness, without a friend, without gold, and if known to be alive, I will be hunted to the gallows."

"Now to leave this land and strike the trails of revenge and gold."

CHAPTER V.

VELVET BILL "MEANS BUSINESS."

FORT VENTURE was the extreme military advance post, placed in a position to hold the Indians in check, and as a protection for the mining-camps and scattering settlements, where also dwelt an element scarcely less to be dreaded than were the red-skins.

Then, too, Fort Venture was to serve as a guard for the Overland Trails, there then being only coaches and wagon-trains making the trips across the continent.

The post was a secure one, with cavalry mostly, but infantry and artillery also, and though strong enough to hold its own in an attack upon it, had not force sufficient to patrol the trails and wholly guard the settlements.

Jumping Off City was the terminus of the travel trail of the Overland coaches, and from there on to the fort, a half-day's run for a rapid Pony Rider, mails and small Express matter were carried only on horseback.

And this trail of the Pony Riders was noted as the most dangerous in the West.

It was a hard one to ride, owing to the nature of the country, and all along its way the graves of Pony Riders could be seen, giving it the name of the Fatal Trail.

It was here that the Indian Pony Rider made his run, going from Fort Venture to Jumping Off City, through Miner's Roost, then on to Dismal City and return.

It was a very long, perilous and hard ride, and the Pony Rider was wont to make six hours do the work, the round run being made once each week, to catch the coaches on the main Overland station of Dismal City.

Sunset Sam was the Overland driver of the coach from Dismal City to Jumping Off City, and he was a hero indeed; but Go-won-go, the Indian, was the Pony Rider over the trail and then on to the fort, so he was noted as a hero of heroes.

When no one could be found to ride Pony Express, Go-won-go, the Red Butterfly, had suddenly come upon the scene and volunteered.

Against all odds he had ridden it until the destruction of Quantrel's band, known as the Red Buzzards, and then he had disappeared.

Again had a band of outlaws appeared known as Captain Moonlight and his men, and once more the Indian Rider had come to ride Pony Express.

He had stuck to it faithfully, escaping death when bets were taken a hundred to one that he would share the fate of those gone before, and again the moonlighters were wiped out, and Go-won-go disappeared from the trail, going West with his adopted father, the mad miner, whom he had rescued.

With this explanation of the situation at Fort Venture and along Sunset Sam's stage-coach run, I will ask the reader to accompany me to Jumping Off City, the mining-camp which was the terminus of the coaches, and so noted, as well as for the fact that it was the home of Velvet Bill, the gambler.

After his mysterious visit to the grave of the rich stranger, buried at Miner's Roost, Velvet Bill had returned to his home in Jumping Off City.

He had two rooms, a log cabin in truth, adjoining the tavern, which was also the headquarters of all gambling, drinking and general deviltry going on in the mining-camp, for it was a very popular resort.

His visit to the stranger's grave seemed to have left its impress upon the gambler, for days passed away and he did not touch a card.

As Parson Prim, after the capture of the moonlighters' retreat on the island, had mysteriously disappeared, the miners were wont to say that they believed that the gambler was going to turn preacher, though none of them ventured to suggest the idea to Velvet Bill himself.

The widow of the murdered man had gone East, the parson had left Miner's Roost for no one knew where, the Indian Pony Rider, after visiting the fort with the rescued miner, and having Surgeon Powell perform an operation upon his head for the restoration of his reason, had also departed with his adopted father, and it was generally agreed along the whole line that matters would be very dull from Dismal City to Fort Venture, for even the secret assassins of the Fatal Trail had disappeared from their haunts, it was said.

Thus a month went by after the supposed death of Captain Moonlight in his cavern retreat, and in all that time Velvet Bill had not been seen in the gambling saloons along the trails, and what it meant the oldest miner could not understand.

But the very last night of the month, to the amazement of all gathered in the saloon, Velvet Bill walked quietly up to his old table and took his seat.

He bowed in his old-time pleasant way to those he knew, and placing his hand gently upon the shoulder of a young miner who was playing cards with three others, said in his quiet way:

"I beg pardon, my friend, but you are playing a square game against three of the worst card-sharps in these mines—I mean what I say, pards!" and with the utterance of the last words Velvet Bill suddenly whipped out his revolvers, and, in a mysterious way which he seemed to know well how to execute, covered the three men with but two weapons.

The young miner had not long been in Jumping Off City, but had "struck it rich" soon after his coming, and, demoralized by his luck, and urged on by the three men who had become his seeming friends, he had turned from his quiet life to drink and cards.

At first he had steadily won, but at last night after night he found himself a loser, though little dreaming that his three companions were allied against him, while so greatly were they feared, no one dared give him the hint of the situation.

And suddenly, after a month's absence from his old haunts, Velvet Bill had appeared upon the scene, and his words fell distinctly, fearlessly, upon all, as he denounced the trio of card-sharps.

So sudden, so unexpected had been his coming and denouncement that the three accused men were covered by Velvet Bill's revolvers ere one of them had time to draw a weapon.

The silence that followed the gambler's words was intense.

Every voice in the large room was hushed, the musical clink of glasses ceased, the tread of feet, the boisterous laugh and calls for drinks were silenced in an instant.

Velvet Bill had reappeared amid the old familiar scenes, where he had so long held sway as the king of gamblers and prince of good fellows, and he meant "business" that was certain, for his revolvers were drawn, his game was covered, and he was no man to draw a weapon unless he meant to use it for deadly work.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RED RIDER RECEIVES A LETTER.

THE home of Daniel Darwin was upon the shores of Lake George, where, in an old farmhouse, he had been born, and later in life he had become the heir to the farm that had belonged to his kindred for several generations.

That home he had left years before to go to the frontier and seek among the gold-mines a fortune to offer the one woman he could love in life—Lucita Courtney, whom, with her brother, he had snatched from death in the lake one day.

He had found his fortune and lost his bride after all his long years of peril and hardships in the mines.

Now he was at home again, after his rescue from Captain Moonlight, and his faithful Go-won-go, the Indian, who, as the Red Rider, had saved him from death at the hands of the outlaws, was his sole companion on the old farm.

One day a letter came to the village addressed to the Indian, who, opening it, read:

"I beg you to come and see me, for I have much to say to you, to ask you, so do not refuse one who owes so much to your courage in the past."

The letter was signed "Lucita Dillingham," and the address given as above New York City, upon the Hudson River.

Go-won-go dwelt over the letter for some time, and it seemed to be a cause for worry; but at last the dark face lighted up and the words came slowly:

"Yes, I will go; but father must not know—no, not now. In this at least I must deceive him."

So, under the pretense of visiting an old friend, Go-won-go left the farm, and, taking a Hudson River boat, was put off at a landing not far from the elegant mansion of the beautiful young widow who had buried her husband on the far frontier several months before.

A village hack put the Indian out at the door, and Go-won-go was ushered into the luxuriantly-furnished parlors, where all around indicated a home of wealth and refinement.

A rustle of skirts in the hall, and then Lucita Dillingham, clad in deep black, swept into the room.

There in the glare of a large bay window stood an Indian maiden, beautiful in face, exquisite in form, and dressed in the neatest of traveling costumes.

Lucita Dillingham paused, then advanced and said:

"Is there not some mistake, for I expected to meet Go-won-go, an Indian youth once known as the Red Butterfly, an Overland Pony Express Rider?"

"I am Go-won-go, the Indian Pony Rider, now in my natural dress as a woman," Mrs. Dillingham, "was the reply of the beautiful Indian girl.

Mrs. Dillingham seemed really startled, while she exclaimed:

"You! you! an Indian girl, the once daring

Red Butterfly, the Pony Rider of the Overland? I cannot believe it."

"It is true, nevertheless, Mrs. Dillingham. I am a woman, but I was the Indian Pony Rider whom you knew as Red Butterfly," came the earnest response of the young Indian woman.

"Who would have believed it?—a woman the hero that you made yourself?"

"It was my secret, madam, and but one other knew it. I went to the mines to rescue my adopted father, Daniel Darwin. As an Indian girl I could have done nothing, but as a supposed Indian youth I accomplished all I hoped to do. That is the exact situation, madam."

Mrs. Dillingham seemed to be in a quandary as to what to say and do, after that confession; but at last she stepped forward, and taking both of the Indian girl's hands in her own, imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, and said fervently:

"God bless you, Go-won-go!"

The words and act seemed to touch the red-skin maiden, for her eyes drooped and her full red lips quivered with emotion.

But suddenly Mrs. Dillingham's face was swept by an expression hard to fathom, for it seemed almost of anger, while her voice was almost severe as she asked:

"And what are you to Daniel Darwin, the miner?"

The eyes of the Indian girl lighted up as she responded:

"His ever devoted, faithful daughter, for he has always been a devoted father to me since he told my own dying father, Patolla the Mohawk, that he would care for me as if I were his own child. That is what Daniel Darwin is to me, what I am to him, madam."

"My child, sit here by my side and tell me of yourself, for I have known you only as Red Butterfly the Pony Express Rider."

"Outside of my career as such there is little to tell, Mrs. Dillingham. My father was a Mohawk chief who went West and allied himself to the Sioux. He hated the civilization surrounding his own people, the Mohawks, and so joined a wild tribe and became their chief.

"But, he loved the whites, and, unwilling to lead a massacre against them, was driven from the tribe by the Sioux, with his wife and little child, myself.

"My Indian mother died in the mountains, while my father and I became wanderers, and, dressed as a young brave I went with him everywhere.

"One day, when I was about fifteen, we saw a white horseman flying from a band of outlaws. We knew him as a pale-face miner—the pale-faces calling him Yankee Dan. He was brought to bay by his pursuers and turned to fight them, though great the odds.

"At once my father said that we would go to his aid, and we saved his life, though the Mohawk chief received his death-wound.

"Dying, my father left me as the child of Daniel Darwin, and returning home with his fortune, dug from the mines, he brought me with him.

"I was placed at a fashionable boarding-school, and I determined to prove to my pale-face companions that, though an Indian girl, I could become their equal.

"Years went by, and misfortune came upon my adopted father. The maiden he had sought a fortune for, had wedded another, and then the banks where his gold was kept failed and he was left penniless almost.

This calamity so affected him that he dreaded to again go to the mines, and I gave to him a buckskin map belonging to my Indian father, giving the location of a mine he had discovered.

"To the West Mr. Darwin went, was recognized by the outlaws, captured, wounded so badly his reason was gone, and he was kept by them to force from him the secret of the mine.

"When word came to me that he had been killed, I left school, rigged myself out as an Indian youth once more, and, knowing the country perfectly, from my wanderings with my father, I went as Pony Rider so that I could track down the outlaws.

"That I did so, and rescued my adopted father, I believe you are aware, Miss Dillingham.

"That is all there is to tell, the whole story of my life," and Go-won-go, who had spoken in a low, earnest tone, showing at least that she felt just pride in the work she had done to save her adopted father, now sat silent and waiting for Mrs. Dillingham to speak, for she saw that she held her listener's deepest interest in all that she had narrated.

At last the beautiful widow said:

"Yes, that is your modest story, Go-won-go, and now I have one to tell you, if you will hear me," and the full, rich voice of the woman quivered as she uttered the words.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WIDOW'S STORY.

"I WILL gladly hear what you have to say," answered the Indian girl, strangely drawn toward this beautiful woman who had thrown away the love of Daniel Darwin for a rich man's possessions.

To look into her face it did not seem to Go-won-go that she was a woman to seek riches rather than love.

Lucia Dillingham had gazed with almost awe upon the Indian girl, who had so modestly told her story. Was it possible that this beautiful, red-skinned maiden, educated, refined, and so lovely in face and form, could have been the desperate Pony Rider of the plains?

Could it be that the one who had dared to ride the Fatal Trail, the one who had saved her jewels and gold, when the coach was held up by Captain Moonlight, putting the outlaw to flight, was this girl before her?

It seemed wonderful if it were really so, and yet she could not doubt the word of the Indian maiden.

"Go-won-go, I am glad that I find in you a girl, not an Indian youth, as I believed you, for I can talk to you better—can make you my friend, my confidante; nay, more—a sister to me.

"Daniel Darwin, your adopted father, saved the life of my brother and myself, and, noble man that he was, I loved him with all my heart and soul.

"He was poor and went to the mines to get a fortune, I promising to be true to him; but my father, though supposed to be a rich man, was on the eve of failure, and my brother had forged for large sums, and there was but one way to save them, and that way was to marry a man of great wealth, who promised to put so much money into my father's hands.

"I was pleaded with by my mother, implored by my father, and I knew that I alone could save my wayward brother from prison; so I made the sacrifice, and the man I married proved to be a truly noble husband.

"But the crash came in spite of my sacrifice, for my father went to the wall, and my brother went to prison.

"I am going to be frank with you, Go-won-go, and tell you all.

"My brother escaped from prison by taking the life of his jailer, and went to the wild West. He visited my home here, less than a year ago, had my butler in his pay, robbed me of gold and jewels, and now I know that he it was who kidnapped your adopted father from the asylum.

"He brazenly told me that he was the chief of the Red Buzzards—was known as Kit Quantrel, and that he it was who took Daniel Darwin back to the frontier to force him to tell the location of the secret mine, or to kill him.

"When my husband went West, he met his death at the hands of my brother; and when I went to see him die, the coach was halted by Captain Moonlight, in whom I recognized my brother, and but for your coming he would have robbed me.

"My husband died and I returned home, and you ran to earth the moonlighters, I heard, and I would know of you if yours was the hand to take my brother's life, for I must know whether he be dead or alive."

"Indirectly I was the cause of your brother's death, if he was Captain Moonlight; but I will tell you how it was," said Go-won-go.

Then she told how she and Surgeon Frank Powell—the latter disguised as Parson Prim—had tracked the outlaw chief to his lair, and the explosion of the keg of powder which had shattered the mouth of the cavern to fragments, and thus made it the tomb of the desperate moonlighter.

"It would seem that no mortal man could escape from death under the circumstances you describe, Go-won-go, and yet Frank Courtney, my poor, wicked brother, seems not born to die thus—no, I once dreamed that I saw him on the gallows.

"This was when I was a little girl, and, strange to say, again and again has that same dream haunted me, until I have begun to feel that he could die only at the rope's end."

"He is dead now, madam, I can assure you, for escape from death in his situation was impossible."

"Was there no outlet to the cave in the rear?"

"None; for we examined it closely, and saw that it was a cavern running back into a mass of rocks which ended at the river, for the outlaw retreat was upon an island, as I said."

"It would seem that you are right, then."

"Yes, and more: My comrade offered the outlaw prisoner his freedom if he would tell us of another opening in the cave. The man was one whom I had captured, and he had been rescued by Captain Moonlight, though they had no means of getting his irons off of him, and thus we found him."

"And he told you of no other exit of the cavern?"

"He did not, even with his life offered him to do so. The entrance to the cave was shivered to atoms and choked up with the debris, so that it would have taken a large force several days to clear it away."

"Your brother is dead, Mrs. Dillingham, beyond all doubt."

"It is better so—far better so, and a fitting end to one of his sinful life."

"Now, let us refer to him no more, but speak of yourself."

"Of me?"

"Yes; for I would ask you to come and be my companion, my friend, to dwell here with me, Go-won-go."

"But my adopted father? I could not leave him."

"Poor Daniel Darwin! how great have been his sorrows and his sufferings. I loved him with all the intensity of my nature; I still love him; and now, when it is possible for him to live in contentment and comfort at least, his reason has utterly gone."

"But I wished to say to you, Go-won-go, that it will be my pleasure and duty to care for him, since he has lost his fortune, and every wish he may have must be gratified, every luxury given him."

"I am rich, very rich, my child, and all I have is at the command of Daniel Darwin and yourself, for I have no other claims—nothing else in life to live for, and if any act of mine can bring a ray of joy into the darkened life of the one I loved, glad will I be."

"But, my dear Mrs. Dillingham, you are in ignorance, I see, of what has happened," cried Go-won-go.

"Oh—don't tell me that Daniel Darwin is dead?"

"No, oh, no! he is alive and well."

"Thank God he is with us yet!" she said, fervently, and then added: "Physically well, but mentally a wreck, and the inmate of a home for madmen."

"No, no! My father is at his home, perfectly well, for good Surgeon Powell took him to Fort Venture after his rescue, and performed an operation, taking the pressure of the skull from upon his brain, which fully restored his reason, and—Why, she has swooned away!" cried Go-won-go, as she saw Mrs. Dillingham suddenly slip from her chair to the floor, where she remained motionless and white as though death had laid upon her its grim touch.

CHAPTER VIII. AFTER DEATH.

GO-WON-GO had returned to the home of Daniel Darwin with a heart full of happiness.

She could see now that Lucita Courtney had not been untrue to her first love—that she had sacrificed herself for others.

Go-won-go saw, too, that, believing Daniel Darwin irrevocably insane, Lucita had confessed her love for him—had told her story and then was overwhelmed when she learned that the noted surgeon's skill had snatched him back from the brink of madness, and had wholly restored his reason.

The shock had caused Mrs. Dillingham to swoon away, and it was long before she returned to consciousness to find Go-won-go by her side.

Then the widow had urged her to keep her secret from Daniel Darwin, and the Indian girl had promised.

The next day, for Lucita would not let her leave her then, she had departed for the old farm on Lake George, and Daniel Darwin had not suspected whither she had gone.

In truth he knew nothing of the death of Mr. Dillingham, and that Lucita was thus made a widow. He only knew that she had married another though pledged to him, and his heart could know but one love.

The mine which had cost him so dearly, he had left to others to work on shares, and with a large income coming in for Go-won-go, for he considered it as her mine, he had been content to live at the old farm in a quiet secluded existence, with his Indian daughter as his only joy in life. Very dearly had he come to love her, after her devotion to him in risking her life again and again to rescue him.

Go-won-go had gone back under a pledge not to betray Lucita Dillingham's secret, but with certain mental reservations that it would not be her fault if Daniel Darwin was not enabled to make discoveries which would bring happiness to his heart, not to speak of another heart being also deeply concerned.

In her luxuriously furnished rooms sat the Widow Dillingham after Go-won-go's departure, gazing out upon the river, dotted here and there with a sail, or with a steamer swiftly cutting its way up or down stream; but, the beauties of Nature apparently held no charm for her then, as she seemed utterly lost in thought.

"How strange all this is," she mused; then, as her thoughts went back to the death scene of her husband in Frank Powell's cabin, at Miner's Roost, started to her feet and said:

"I have never read the confession he asked me to read. Now I will do so!"

She went to a desk, unlocked it, and took out a sealed envelope.

It was addressed:

"To MY WIFE,

"LUCITA DILLINGHAM:

"To be opened only after my death."

"Yes, I must read this now; I must put his life and mine forever in the past, now that the old love comes back into my heart, and which I forced myself to banish, when I became another's wife."

She opened the letter, for such it was, and read as follows, in a low, earnest tone:

"MY DEARLY LOVED WIFE:—

"I can bear it to have you read these lines, when I know your eyes will not fall upon them until after I am dead.

"I can bear it, for never in my life except in one thing, which I now confess, did I deceive you.

"But the deception was in not telling you the truth."

"In the long ago, when a young man just of age, I met one who held over me a power I could not resist. She was a beautiful girl of nineteen, the daughter of a poor widow dwelling near the college which I attended.

"I met her through my best friend, a man who was three years my senior, and who was studying law at the college. He was secretly engaged to her, and took me to see her."

"I loved her the moment my eyes met hers; and it seemed to me that she loved me."

"I was the heir to a large fortune; my friend was poor, almost a charity student, and the maiden was a teacher in the village school near the college, while her mother took in sewing for the students to help support her little home."

"It was told me by my friend that the widowed mother of his lady-love had been the wife of a young nobleman, who was forced to get a divorce from her by order of the head of his house, and rather than depend upon such a man for her living, she had fled secretly to America with her little girl."

"Certain it was the mother was born a lady, and once had been very beautiful, while her daughter had received every advantage of education."

"But to my confession, my wife:

"From the moment I met the girl I hated the man I called my friend, and I was led away by the beautiful creature until I had no will of my own."

"She confessed her love for me, and it was at her urging that I, hardly more than a boy, entered into a secret marriage with her. Her mother went with us, and we drove to a distant village and were married."

I had requested that the marriage should remain a secret until I finished my term in college, and soon after the mother and daughter moved away, and my one-time friend accused me of being the cause."

"We were foes, then, and never spoke."

"I graduated, and, after a short season of travel, went to join my wife, just two years after my marriage to her."

"Her mother had died suddenly, and she was living in a pleasant little home in Virginia, which I had bought and fitted up for her."

"There, too, were our children—two little baby boys, twins."

"For a brief season I was happy, Lucita, but only for a brief season, for I soon realized that my wife had never truly loved me—that she had plotted for my money and never had ceased to love the man she had cast off for my fortune."

"Then, too, he appeared upon the scene: a quarrel followed; I was entrapped without suspecting the trap, and a duel followed."

"My second was in his pay, but though having his money in hand, did not leave the bullet out of my pistol as had been intended, and so I killed my adversary, while he wounded me so severely that for months I was not expected to live."

"When at last I got well my wife had gone, leaving a note in which she said, by the terms of my father's will, if I married without the consent of the executor, I was to lose my fortune. So she deserted me, taking our children with her, and never would see again the one who had killed the only man she ever had loved."

"Years after, in an English paper sent me by an attorney, I read a notice of her death, and it was stated that she had deserted her children before leaving America."

"Then I asked you to become my wife, and to you I leave all my fortune; but if ever you can find my poor boys, I leave it to you, my wife, to give them from your riches that they may never know want."

Such was the confession after death, and when Lucita had read it over, she said, firmly:

"I will find those two unfortunate boys and share with them their father's fortune—it is theirs as well as mine."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEATH TRAIL.

COLONEL SEELEY, the commandant of Fort Venture, was noted for three things.

First, he was a most courteous gentleman, popular with all; second, he was a thorough soldier and gallant officer; and third, he was the father of the prettiest maiden ever seen in army circles, it was said.

Alice Seeley had come to Fort Venture fresh from a fashionable boarding-school, and with the éclat of having taken first honors from her many rivals for distinction.

She had received a splendid education, was accomplished, sung divinely, played half a dozen instruments, painted like a professional artist, and her early training on the Texan frontier, when a girl of thirteen, had made her a dangerous adversary.

She fenced well, could throw a lasso with marvelous skill, was a dead shot with the revolver, and had she been so minded, could have ridden a Texas steer.

Her eyes were dark, her hair auburn, complexion bronzed but perfect, her teeth milk-white, and her form the perfection of grace.

Yet she was not in the least degree spoilt, would chat with a private soldier as quickly as with an officer, and was a friend of even the most cross-grained woman in the army circle of society at Fort Venture.

With scores of lovers, she loved no one, if

seemed, and yet she had taken the strongest fancy to Go-won-go, the Indian Pony Express Rider, when she was at the fort.

A "Daughter of the Regiment" they called her, and yet was the most devoted daughter to her own gallant father, whose idol she was.

There were other maidens at the fort, and lovely ones, too, yet there was no rivalry between them and Alice Seeley.

The reader is presented at Fort Venture, a short while after the giving up of the Pony Trail by Go-won-go.

The Indian Rider had said that there would be no more trouble for Pony Riders upon the trails, not even the ride between the fort and Jumping Off City.

He had furthermore said that, if there should be a rider killed, to report the fact to Velvet Bill, who had pledged himself to ride the run if there should be any one slain.

Perfect confidence was felt in the Indian Rider's assertion, for at the fort, with one or two exceptions, not one believed the red-skin to be a woman.

So the Pony Riders again started upon their rides, and it was believed that, with Captain Moonlight dead and the Secret Assassins of the Fatal Trail driven off, no more fatalities would occur.

But one day the sentinel looked in vain to report the coming of Pony Rider Ben when the time came around for his coming.

A feeling of uneasiness began to be felt as a couple of hours went by, for many a poor Rider had failed to come in and a search had found his dead body alongside of the trail.

The Fatal Trail had gained such a weird fame that men turned pale at the thought of it. It was said to be haunted, and brave men had brought in reports of mysterious phantoms seen there on moonlight nights.

No clew could be obtained of who the assassins really were, where they came from, where they disappeared to when pursued.

Some said they were red-skinned, others that they were pale-face outlaws.

But three Riders had alone been able to go over the trail in safety. Buffalo Bill was one of these, and for some reason, which they had hinted at but not made known, the assassins would not fire upon him.

Then there was Go-won-go, the Indian Rider; but, somehow, they could never catch him off his guard, and he escaped assassination at their hands.

The third was Velvet Bill, who, at the urging of Go-won-go, had several times given up his gambling and carried the Pony Express to the fort and back.

And Velvet Bill, for some reason, apparently knew more of the assassins of the Fatal Trail than any other person in that wild region.

So it was that Go-won-go had told Colonel Seeley that if the Secret Assassins appeared again to call upon Velvet Bill to ride.

Just why he did so he did not say, and no clew was given for his selection of the gambler of Jumping Off City for the perilous duty.

Three hours passed and Pony Rider Ben did not show up; so Colonel Seeley ordered out a lieutenant and a dozen men to ride over the trail in search of him.

It was the next day when they returned, and Lieutenant Ames, the officer in charge, made his report:

"We found his body, sir, near the grave of Sky Rocket, the Pony Rider. He had been robbed and his horse was gone. Upon his hat was pinned this slip of paper."

The colonel seized the paper eagerly and read aloud:

"This trail shall still be fatal to any man who rides Pony Express over it."

"Riders be warned!"

"THE SECRET ASSASSINS!"

Colonel Seeley was without doubt greatly disturbed in mind at what he heard and read.

"This is sad news, Lieutenant Ames, for poor Pony Rider Ben was a gallant, bright-hearted fellow."

"Yes, sir, and he fought bravely for his life, for he had three wounds in his body, and one in the forehead, doubtless the last one given him."

"I buried him where he had fallen, sir, and that makes number sixteen of the Pony Riders who have gone under on that terrible trail."

"Yes, and I fear his reserve, Black Horse Bob, will not go on the next ride."

"Yes, sir, Bob will go; but I fear only to meet the same fate as Ben."

"Well, what is to be done, for the mails and Express matter must go, not to speak of official papers the Pony Riders now carry."

"I cannot spare soldiers for the work in force. Buffalo Bill has his duties as chief of scouts to attend to, and I really am at a loss to know what to do."

"I will volunteer for the ride, sir, if Black Horse Bob goes under," was the reply of the plucky lieutenant, who was ambitious for fame no matter what the risks to get it.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, sir, for you are too valuable as an officer. It is bad enough to lose the splendid fellows, the Pony Riders, without risking my best officers."

"I thank you, Colonel Seeley, for the compli-

ment; but shall I inform Black Horse Bob of Ben's death?"

"I will send for him."

The orderly was dispatched for the Pony Rider, who soon after appeared.

He was a man of small physique, tough as hickory, fearless-faced, and had been a scout for years.

When told of the death of his brother rider he said with feeling:

"Poor Ben! I feared it, sir."

"And you will make the ride, Bob?"

"I'll make a try of it, colonel; but I guess it's my turn next."

"I hope not; but I do not wish you to go unless you are willing to take all chances."

"I'll take 'em, colonel, and if I go under, why you'll have to get that Indian with a charmed life back again."

"The Red Butterfly, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"No, he will not come here again, and I hope you may have no trouble, Bob, on the ride."

"Time will tell, sir," was the answer of the brave fellow.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK HORSE BOB TAKES THE RIDE.

THE death of Pony Rider Ben cast a gloom over all in the fort.

"Number Sixteen," he was called, and then all eyes turned sorrowfully upon "Number Seventeen."

It was Black Horse Bob, so-called from the fact that he always rode black horses.

He was also known as "Pony Bob," as much from his small size, as that he had won the name in Utah of riding only ponies.

Pony Bob had won a name as a courier* long before, and after the going of Go-won-go, had been sent to Fort Venture with Pony Rider Ben to ride what had been known as the Fatal Trail.

For awhile all had gone well, and then came the shock of Ben's death, and the dread that Black Horse Bob would be the next to die—Number Seventeen.

Of all at the fort Pony Bob was the most unconcerned apparently at the danger before him.

The many victims of the Secret Assassins of the Trail held no terrors for him, it seemed, for he was cheery as ever and jokingly said:

"I'll try Red Butterfly's game and go through, anyhow."

"But he had a charmed life, Bob," an officer said.

"I've thought I had one, too, sir," was the reply, and Pony Bob recalled many a desperate danger he had passed through.

"Father, will you let that poor man go to his death?" asked Alice Seeley, going into her father's quarters before the time for the starting of the Rider upon his perilous run.

"What can I do, my child?"

"Duty demands that the Pony Riders must go."

"Could you not send a squad, sir, as you have done before?"

"No, for I cannot spare the men and horses each week."

"There is Buffalo Bill, sir."

"He has his duties to attend to, Alice, and besides, you remember the threat of the Secret Assassins, that because they would not kill Cody, if I sent him again as Pony Rider, they would revenge themselves by making you, my child, the victim of their hate?"

"I care nothing for their threats, father, and only think of Scout Cody as one whom they will not harm, for some reason known to them, and I fear poor Black Horse Bob is only going to his death."

"Alas! I, too, fear so, Alice; but Red Butterfly took the same chances."

"Go-won-go was a marvel, sir, and seemed to defy death where others fell."

"Shall I send for Go-won-go again, then?"

"No, sir, not that! not that!" excitedly cried Alice.

"He would not come, if I did, for he was only here to rescue his adopted father, the mad miner."

"He said, you remember, Alice, that only one thing would bring him to the frontier again, and that would be to rescue you, if the Secret Assassins carried out their threat, or to avenge you."

"Yes, father, I remember that Go-won-go said so, and I know it was no idle promise; but it is Black Horse Bob in danger now, not I, and I only wish something could be done to avert the fate that it seems he must surely meet."

"If your bright little brain can suggest a good plan, Alice, I will only too gladly adopt it," said the colonel.

"What was it that Go-won-go said about Velvet Bill?"

"Ah! the gambler?"

"Yes, sir, for so he is called, courtly gentleman though he appears to be."

* Robert H. Haslan, for a long time Army Courier and Pony Express Rider, and hero of many an escape. He once rode two horses 108 miles in eight hours. He is at present in Government service.

THE AUTHOR.

"And is at heart, whatever his calling may be. There is some mystery about that man, my child, which I cannot understand. He is a gambler, called the King of Sports, and his luck is phenomenal, while I never heard it hinted that he was a card-sharp."

"From all accounts, father, it would be sudden death to the one who hinted it," observed Alice, with a smile.

"Yes; but what a splendid officer he would have made!"

"He would indeed, sir!"

"He is a man of education, and is refined and courtly; but if he has other name than that of Velvet Bill I have yet to learn it."

"He is fearless, too, sir, and has a good heart, from all accounts."

"Yes, he is a remarkable man; but, to the question now of his riding Pony Express."

"Yes, father, Go-won-go said, you remember, that Velvet Bill was to be called upon should the Pony Riders again fall victims to the bullets of the Secret Assassins."

"Yes."

"And he seemed to urge it, sir."

"I had almost forgotten the fact."

"It might be well to send for the—the gambler, father, and see what he has to say about it."

"True, and I will, if—"

"If what, sir?"

"If Black Horse Bob is killed."

"I wish it could be done before, sir."

"No; Bob must take his chances on this run, and—"

"Could you not send an escort this time, father?"

"That dare-devil Ames would go alone."

"Lieutenant Ames?" quickly asked Alice, while her face slightly changed color.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes, he coolly volunteered to do the Pony Riding if Pony Bob was killed."

"No, no, father! Lieutenant Ames must not go!" and Alice seemed in deadly earnest now.

"Nor Pony Bob?" queried the colonel with a smile.

"Yes, if it must be, sir, only I wish you would send an escort with him."

"I cannot, for I must send a large force into the Indian country at once, and Ames will have to go with his troop, so I cannot spare an escort for a Pony Rider; and besides, it is against general orders."

"Then Black Horse Bob must take his chances, it seems, father?"

"Yes, Alice; no help for it."

"And if he falls you will then do as Go-won-go suggested, and send for the gambler, Velvet Bill?"

"Yes, my child, I will send for Velvet Bill, the gambler," thoughtfully responded the colonel.

"And for some reason, father, which I cannot understand, I believe he will have the same charmed life that Go-won-go used to have."

"It seems that he has now, from all accounts, Alice; but, here comes Pony Bob to report for his ride."

As Colonel Seeley spoke, the Pony Rider entered the colonel's quarters.

He saluted the commandant, bowed courteously to Alice, and said:

"I am ready for my ride, Colonel Seeley."

"All right, Bob; here are some official papers for you, and I anticipate those you are to bring back will be of considerable importance."

"I will do my best, colonel, to get them through in safety. Any orders, sir?"

"Nothing else, Bob, more than to wish you success on your run."

"Yes, and may Heaven guard you through every danger, Black Horse Bob!" added Alice Seeley, fervently.

With a bow the Pony Rider left the room and, springing upon his waiting horse, darted away upon his ride along the Fatal Trail.

CHAPTER XI.

PONY BOB'S RUN FOR LIFE.

IT was just dark when Black Horse Bob, or as he was more frequently called, Pony Bob, rode away from the fort.

The clatter of hoofs as he went along like a deer was heard for a while and then died away.

All saw him depart with a foreboding of evil, and one who sought to give him a cheer found no one to join in, for men appeared to feel that silence was best, just then.

The gloaming is always a sad hour, and there are many people whom twilight affects most unpleasantly; but when the shadows were gone, the lights were glimmering about the fort, and the band was heard playing enlivening airs, the gloom was banished.

And on his way flew Pony Bob, mounted upon his fleet black horse.

He knew his danger as only Pony Riders could know it, and was well aware that behind every rock and bush a foe might lurk to send a bullet into his breast.

He did not swerve from the trail, however, and his fleet black horse cast the miles rapidly behind him.

Of course he did not keep up the same speed that he had taken when he left the fort, for there was no relay between Fort Venture and Jumping Off City, where he could obtain a fresh horse.

One horse had to make that end of the run, and the animals the Pony Riders had could do it in a long, swinging lope which would carry them along at a brisk pace.

When nearing the camps the horses were trained to get down to their best work, and they would dash up to the taverns as though they had held that speed all the run.

But between Jumping Off City and Dismal City, there was a change of horses at Miner's Roost and three relay stations as well, where the coaches also got fresh teams.

The drivers of the coaches also were wont to drive in and out of a station at a tremendous speed, while those who never traveled by them might be deceived, but others knew from experience that, once away from the camps, the horses were not urged to any very great rate of speed.

Some ten miles had Pony Bob gone over, when he suddenly drew rein.

He had seen, far ahead down the valley, a flash of light.

It was gone in an instant, but he knew that it was no mistake—that he had seen it.

"It was like the lighting of a match," he muttered.

The nature of the ground was such that to go around the valley he would have to turn back, pass around the ridge and go by night where there was no trail.

To do this also would carry him miles out of his way.

So he decided to take the chances, and, being forewarned, he would forearm himself.

To do this he dismounted, untied from his saddle four hoof-mufflers, and walked on ahead of his horse, the animal following.

He had marked in his eye as well as he could the spot where he had seen the flash of light, and knew that he was not mistaken when he heard a voice ahead call out:

"Come! to your posts, for it's time he was coming!"

In an instant Pony Bob knew all: the Secret Assassins were there for his coming, lying in wait to kill him.

His catching sight of the flash of light had warned him, and the smell of tobacco in the air told him that some man had lighted his pipe.

His going on foot, and the hoofs of his horse being muffled, had prevented his being heard and seen, for the assassins had expected the clatter of iron-shod hoof-falls to give them warning.

Leaping lightly into his saddle, Pony Bob drew a revolver in each hand, drove his spurs deep, and, firing on either side, made the bold attempt to break through the ambush of his unseen foes.

The flashes and reports of his revolvers were the first warning the ambushers had of his presence.

There were half a dozen of them, and, in obedience to the command of their leader, they were leisurely walking to the positions assigned them, when the Pony Rider was upon them.

One of Pony Bob's shots, fired at random though they were, dropped a man dead in his tracks, and instead of striking back, the others sprung for shelter, it flashing upon them that they had been entrapped themselves.

In an instant Pony Bob had gone flying by, unhurt, and going like the very wind along the trail as he bent low in his saddle.

A few scattering shots were fired after him, and his mocking laughter floated back as he sped on.

"Curses! I thought the cavalry, or Buffalo Bill and his scouts were upon us, when, after all, he was all alone!"

The speaker was a tall man of slender form, clad in buckskin, even to cap and moccasins.

He was a white man, as could be seen in the darkness, and he turned from flight toward a large boulder on the trail when he saw that the Pony Rider had dashed through.

"His horse's hoofs were muffled, cap'n, or he'd never got near us," said a man coming out from behind a rock.

"Yes; it was Pony Bob, and he is up to many a trick; but where is Voss?"

"He tumbled when Pony Bob shooted, and I guesses he didn't git up no more."

"Go and see, and find out if any one else was hurt."

"There's no one else ter hurt, cap'n, 'ceptin' you and me."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Oh, I doesn't count Injuns, for they never gits hurted, cap'n, ef thar be a pale-face round ter catch a bullet."

"I guess you are half-right, Powder Face; but go and see."

"I'll go, cap'n; but in all my experience it's been pale-faces that gets hurted and kilt."

"You go and see if Voss is dead, and I will call the red-men."

As he spoke, the man whom the other had ad-

dressed as "captain" placed a whistle to his lips and gave three sharp calls.

In response a form was seen approaching a moment after, soon followed by a second and a third.

They were Indians, without doubt, as their walk and bearing revealed, even in the dark.

"Well, you are here, red-skins, and Voss is the one who went under. Is he dead, Powder Face?"

"Dead as a coyote," was the response.

"Well, you red-men shoulder him and take him to the retreat, and his death more than settles the fate of Pony Bob, whom we must kill on his run back to the fort."

The man glided away, followed by the others. Soon they were carrying the body of the dead man, and looking like phantoms as they went along with noiseless tread.

CHAPTER XII.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

THE reader will recall that the mysterious personage who has figured in this story, was left in a situation where he had boldly played a game of life and death against three men, whom he accused of cheating a young miner at cards.

It is now time to show the result of that bold charge, which Velvet Bill had backed up by covering the trio with two revolvers, yet in such a clever way that each of the three men felt that the muzzle of a revolver looked straight into his eyes.

The three card-sharps had come to the mines as miners; but, having struck it rich, they had squandered their gold, and not liking hard work turned to a life of evil.

They became bravos, and the terror of the mining-camps, and their mission apparently was to rob all who would submit to their sharp practice, and kill all who resented their cheating.

When Jumping Off City became too warm for them, they would go to Dismal City for a time, and then back to Miner's Roost, so that they kept the three camps terrorized.

They were burly fellows, strong as giants, desperate as wolves when in trouble, and they shot to kill, making it their boast, and a true boast, too, that they "had a graveyard of their own making in each one of the three mining-camps."

Between the three men and Velvet Bill there had never been any intimacy.

The gambler was known to play a square game, but to have phenomenal luck, while the "Terrors," as they were called, were equally as well known as cheats, playing with marked cards and bulldozing an adversary out of his money.

They were also called, "Tom, Dick and Harry," and it was said that Velvet Bill had named them.

They never asked the gambler to play but once, and then he had said:

"No, there must be honor among thieves, and I do not wish to take your money."

The trio took this as a compliment, as it seemed to be a confession from Velvet Bill to them that he also was a card-sharp; but somehow they had never cared to ask him to join them in a game where a victim was to be fleeced.

It was these men who had, night after night, gotten into a game with the young miner, only to lead him on by allowing him to win at first and then begin their trick of robbery.

The young miner had come to the mines a "tenderfoot," yet had had the good fortune to meet with big success, for he had hit a rich lead.

He had told Velvet Bill, one day, something of his life—that he had left home under a cloud, suffering for another's crime, one whom he could not betray, and he had hoped to get money enough in the mines to pay back every dollar he had been accused of appropriating.

Could he do this, then he could make known to his accuser who was the real thief, and force him to come out and state that the money had been found—that the accused was not guilty.

And he had added:

"I love that man's daughter, and she does not believe me guilty, only with the brand of thief upon me I could not claim her as my wife."

Such was the young miner's story, and when he had laid by the sum needed, and had remained only to get a few thousands more, he had been led into temptation by the Terrors, forced to play with them, and losing heavily, was striving by further play to win back his vanishing fortune.

Had Velvet Bill been in the saloon when he first began to play, ten days before, knowing his story, he would have stopped the game then; but the gambler was holding himself aloof, it will be remembered, and had only gone into the saloon that night when he heard that "Tenderfoot," as the miners called the young man, was being victimized by the Three Terrors.

The appearance of Velvet Bill again in the saloon, after his long absence, his bold way of protecting the young miner, Carrol Carr, and the fact that he had the Terrors "covered" created a decided sensation.

A hush fell upon all and the situation was one of most painful silence.

At last the young Tenderfoot said sternly:

"Do you mean what you say, Velvet Bill?"

"I am not a man to use words without meaning, Tenderfoot, and I repeat that these men have cheated you. How much have they won from you?"

Velvet Bill, as he spoke, did not take his eyes off the trio, nor move the muzzles of his revolvers a particle.

"They have won every dollar I had laid aside, sir, for a purpose of which I told you, and I am now playing away, to my shame be it said, the last thousand I had saved for my own use," and the voice of the speaker trembled with emotion.

"Well, you give me your seat and I will play these men for all they have stolen from you."

"To make it more interesting for them, I'll play double the sums on each game, which they put up, and until I have won back every dollar of your money, Tenderfoot, or lost every dollar of my own, not one of us shall rise from this table," and Velvet Bill's face was stern as Death now.

"Don't yer think we has su'thin' ter say about this leetle game, Velvet Bill?" asked "Tom," in a low, sullen tone.

"Not a word until the game of cards is played out to the end; and, then, if you wish to make it a game of life and death, I will still play the three of you single-handed," was Velvet Bill's reply.

"Does yer hear that, pards?" asked Tom.

"We does, and we plays ther game as pleases yer, Velvet Bill," answered "Dick," while Harry chimed in with:

"Yas, gold is ther game now, and lead ter foller it."

"That is just my idea, gentlemen" said Velvet Bill smilingly.

Then he added:

"You have been robbing this young man by cheating him, playing with marked cards, and now you are to play with me for the amount you have won from him, and my word that this time you will play square. Are you ready?"

"We is, and anxious," said one, and though he did look anxious, it was not to play the gambler.

"We has wanted a game with you, Pard Velvet, fer many a long day," another remarked, boldly.

"Yas, we is ter play squar', and we is ter see thet, you does ther same, Velvet Sport," was the remark of the third.

"Gentlemen, you see that I uncover these men now, in your presence, and I ask only for fair play," and Velvet Bill addressed the crowd, as he now for the first time lowered his revolvers.

"Yer shall have fair play, pard," cried a miner, and the crowd chimed in with the speaker.

The faces of the three sharps grew blank at this, for it cut them off from an intention formed, and telegraphed by an expression, to cover the daring sport and kill him at the first chance; but seeing that the appeal of Velvet Bill had carried the miners with him, they dared not carry out their murderous intention, for none knew better than they that a frontier crowd was not to be trifled with.

CHAPTER XIII.

R GOLD AND LEAD.

VELVET BILL was as serene as a May morning.

His old-time cheery smile had come back to him, and he took his seat at the table with the air of a man who was going to enjoy heartily the game before him.

As he took his seat, he returned his revolvers to his belt, and said:

"Come, pards, as you three play against me, keep on your side of the table. I want none of you next to me."

"Yer is afeerd we might overlook yer cards?" growled Tom.

"Oh no, I am afraid you might assassinate me unless I kept my eye on the three of you," was the terse reply.

"Say, pards, ef he is a-goin' ter insult us, we won't play," Dick declared.

"So says I," Harry added.

"I could not insult you if I tried; but you will play, for I am in this game to stay to the end."

"You can't back down," and the miner, who had before spoken, and the crowd gave a roar of approval which added to the uneasiness of the trio.

"Now, tenderfoot, tell me the exact sum these fleecers have stripped from you?" and Velvet Bill did not take his eyes off the sharps as he spoke to Carrol Carr.

"I lost the first night five hundred dollars," answered the young miner, taking an ace of hearts out of his pocket, on which he had jotted down his losses.

"And the next?"

"One thousand dollars."

"Yes?"

"Then it was two hundred."

"Well?"

"And six hundred."

"I see."

"And two thousand."

"Going up, I see. And then?"

"I lost in one game a bag of small gold worth five thousand."

"Ah! any more?"

"Yes, sir, seven hundred dollars, which made up the sum I spoke to you of."

"Yes, ten thousand it is," remarked Velvet Bill, who had kept the several sums named in his mind. "Any more?"

"Last night I lost another thousand, and but for your coming they would have gotten my last dollar to-night."

"I understand," and then to the trio the gambler said:

"Now, Tom, Dick and Harry, we are to play for just eleven thousand dollars, which you robbed this young man of."

"Now, I intend to sit here until I win it back, or lose all I have, and you shall not leave the table until the amount of your robbery is returned, unless I lose."

"I could make you give up your stolen plunder, but I prefer to play you for it, giving you a chance to keep it if you can."

"And more, I will stake double the amount each time that you do, for you will put up one thousand on the first game against my two thousand, and so on."

"Do I make myself clearly understood?"

"Yes, in the game for gold; but about the other that is ter foller it?"

"As there are three of you, why your odds will be still greater against me."

"Now put up your money."

"Waal, we hain't much with us ter-night, and—"

"Very well, one of you can go after it, and I will ask two of my friends to accompany him, for fear he may forget to return."

A general laugh followed this remark of the Velvet Sport, and Dick said with a growl:

"Maybe I has enough ef we loses."

"Yes, I knew you had it with you, for you are too keen to hide it away as you might have to leave town very suddenly."

"Now put up your money."

This was done, and the gambler laid double the amount on the table.

The crowd had now ceased to be interested in other matters, and crowded eagerly around the Velvet Sport and the trio.

All other games were declared off, and the one before them was the center of attraction.

Carrol Carr, with pale face and anxious mien, stood at the back of Velvet Bill's chair, and to the credit of the young miner be it said, he feared harm to the one who befriended him more than for himself.

"Harry" now threw down upon the table a pack of cards, and Velvet Bill laughed, while he said:

"This is to be a square game, pards, and marked cards won't go."

Then he called for a fresh pack, tossed them on the table and told Dick to break them open.

This he did.

"Now, Tom, you deal, and let me say right here the man I catch in any trickery I shall kill and his body shall still remain here to see the game out."

"We kin kill, too, Velvet, if we catches you in any tricks."

"You are at liberty to do so," was the calm response, and the cards were dealt, Harry having been the one selected by his two companions to play the first game.

The Velvet Sport was as indifferent as though the game was for pleasure, while the Three Terrors were as nervous as he was cool, in spite of their efforts to appear reckless of consequences.

The game was played to the end amid a dead silence, and the trio gave a yell, for Harry had won.

The crowd moved uneasily, showing where their sympathy lay, and the young man turned a shade whiter.

But Velvet Bill was as serene as before.

"Try again, Harry, fer you is in luck," whispered Dick, and this was seconded by Tom as Velvet Bill placed five thousand dollars upon the table, the trio putting up half as much.

And this time the crowd shouted, for Velvet Bill won.

"You try, Lick," nervously said Harry.

And the sport put up six thousand, and once more he won.

"You take 'em this time, Tom," whispered Dick, as the Velvet Sport put up his money, this time making his amount eleven thousand dollars.

Dick took up the cards nervously, and the game was played in silence; when, quick as a flash, the three men were covered again by the Velvet Sport, who, having won, said:

"I am ready for the game of lead now!"

"Waal, we hain't, when yer has us covered."

"Tenderfoot, take your money off the table."

It was a command from the Velvet Sport, and Carrol Carr obeyed.

"Now, pards, I wish to say to you that I'll give you just one hour to get to your cabin and leave Jumping Off City, and if you fail to go, then I shall see that neither this nor any other

mining-camp on the Overland shall be troubled by you again."

"Will you take the hint, Tom, Dick and Harry, or shall I make my meaning more plain?"

"See here, pard, we hain't no durned fools not ter know what are best for us, so we moves along, as I sees we hain't wanted in Jumping Off City."

"Come, Tom and Dick."

"Ta-ta, pards! So long, sport, until we meets ag'in."

And Harry very philosophically accepted the situation and rose.

His two comrades did likewise, Dick remarking:

"I pass, Pard Velvet."

"Tra-la-la, Velvet!" added Tom, as he followed his companions.

And as the trio disappeared a wild cheer went up for Velvet Bill, who had won his games for gold and lead against such odds as that terrible trio was known to be.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GANTLET OF DEATH.

PONY RIDER BOB had been unhurt by the scattering fire of the ambushers, and he had sent back, as he sped along, his laugh of derision.

"We fooled 'em that time, old fellow," he said to his horse, and the animal seemed to appreciate the fact as well as his rider.

Jumping Off City was reached just as the late sitters-up were preparing to hunt their blankets for what sleep they could corral by dawn.

Out of the gambling saloon, which was an annex of the tavern, came a man who stood listening to the clatter of hoofs, and said to those about him:

"It's Pony Ben, pards."

The speaker was Velvet Bill, who had just finished playing cards, to be, as usual, a winner.

Since he had driven the Three Terrors out of Jumping Off City, he had become more and more a hero among the miners, for those men had bulldozed the community beyond endurance.

The part which Velvet Bill had taken also served as a quietus upon other unruly spirits, and the camps had really improved greatly.

Carrol Carr had awakened from his downward path, and under the advice of the gambler had gone back to work his mine for all it was worth, and was cheered by discovering that he had not wholly cleaned out his treasure by any means.

Every night since, the young miner had gone to see Velvet Bill, if only to have a word with him, for he seemed strangely drawn toward this mysterious man, whom all liked, yet feared.

Coming out of the saloon, on the night when the Pony Rider appeared, Velvet Bill had just lighted a cigar, intending, as was his wont, to take a short walk before retiring.

A moment after, Pony Bob dashed up, and the sport called out:

"Eh, Black Horse Bob, it is you, is it?"

"Yes, Velvet Bill, and the Secret Assassins are at their old game of killing again," answered Pony Bob.

"What!" and the man whose face never changed in danger, whose nerve never failed him under the greatest strain, fairly started now at the words of Pony Bob.

"Do you mean that you were ambushed, Black Horse Bob?" eagerly asked the gambler.

"I do, and I got through by the merest chance, while I believe I turned up the toes of one man, for he fell at my fire."

"Come, Black Horse, while your relay is being saddled for you, tell me about it," and Velvet Bill spoke almost in a pleading tone.

In a few words the Pony Rider told the story of his seeing the flash, as a man lighted his pipe with a match, and how he had dismounted and approached the spot.

"This is remarkable, most remarkable," said the gambler.

"It's the same old game being played, as poor Pony Rider Ben found out to his cost," Pony Bob remarked.

"Ben? Why, was he fired upon?"

"He was killed upon his last ride into the fort."

"Great God! Pony Rider Ben killed?" excitedly repeated Velvet Bill.

"He certainly was, and his grave makes Number Sixteen. Mine will be Number Seventeen, I guess."

"You must not go under that way, Pony Bob, and when you return I will ride with you to the fort."

"It would do no good, Velvet Bill, and perhaps only cost you your life."

"No, I must take the chances, and if I go under I did hear something about the Indian Pony Rider saying you would ride Pony Express if another grave was made along the trail."

"You heard this?"

"Yes, I heard it from Buffalo Bill; but, maybe, I should not have spoken of it."

"Oh, yes; it makes no difference, Black Horse;

but when you return, halt for me to go with you."

A moment after Pony Bob was away on a fresh horse, on his ride to Miner's Roost, while the gambler went on his walk, and those who heard all that passed noted the fact that he had seemed more moved by what the Rider had told him than they had ever suspected he could be.

Pony Bob made his changes to fresh horses at the stations, had his breakfast at the tavern at Miner's Roost, and continuing on his run late that night reached Dismal City where he was glad to seek rest.

It may have been pride, which impelled Pony Bob to make the ride of the Fatal Trail alone, on his run back, but he made up his mind, whatever the cause, that he would not let Velvet Bill accompany him out of Jumping Off City, as he had said he wished to do.

To avoid this Pony Bob had pushed his horses all along the trail harder than was his wont, and instead of riding into Jumping Off City for a late breakfast, he dashed in two hours ahead of time.

He approached the tavern in a walk, too, not wishing to awaken Velvet Bill by the rattle of hoofs, and hastily changing horses and eating a light breakfast, he was off again.

With the ride by daylight he did not have dread of an ambush, as by night, though he knew that about half the Pony Riders who had been the victims of the Secret Ambushers, had been killed in the broad glare of the day.

But, Pony Bob had been a scout before he was an Overland Rider and army courier, and he knew pretty well how to take care of himself, and kept his eyes constantly roving ahead.

He had arrived within half a dozen miles of the fort, the nearest point where the Ambushers had ever claimed a victim, and was approaching the head of a barren valley, when he saw two men suddenly rise up before him, as though out of the ground.

Pony Bob drew rein, not knowing how many more he would have to encounter, when his horse gave a start and looked behind him.

"Ah! caught in a trap am I? Two ahead, and four behind! My way lies ahead."

He spoke with perfect calmness, after glancing back and seeing that four men had risen as from the ground in his rear.

"An Indian and a white man in my front, and three red-skins and a pale-face in my rear! Come, Blackbird, we must go through, and if I fall, you have got the pouches, so take them on to the colonel without fail," said Pony Bob, as he settled himself in the saddle for the rush, a revolver in each hand.

The splendid black seemed to understand what was expected of him, all that his rider had said to him. He moved forward with head erect, his eyes upon his enemies.

The white man in the pass in front wore a mask, Pony Bob noticed, and was dressed in buckskin.

He also wore moccasins, and had a skull-cap on, while he was armed only with revolvers.

The Indian apparently had only a bow and arrows.

If any others were in front they did not appear, and those in the rear now came on at a run.

With a word to his horse, Pony Bob started to break through the gantlet of death which had proven fatal to so many a daring Pony Rider before him.

CHAPTER XV.

PONY BOB ARRIVES.

THE two men who barred the way of Pony Bob seemed confident.

The masked man, who, the rider saw, was a white man, held his revolvers ready.

The Indian held his bow in hand, his arrow poised for a shot.

If there were others, Pony Bob knew that he would soon find it out.

Those in his rear were coming on at a run, and silently.

The white man, and he was unmasked, save by a flowing beard and long bushy hair, held a rifle in his hand, but the Indians were armed with only bows and arrows, or at least no other weapons were visible.

They were some two hundred yards in the rear of Pony Bob, while those in his front were not one-fourth that distance.

The spot had been well chosen, for on neither side could he turn from the trail on account of the rocky land and divides.

"Now, Blackbird!" and with the words Pony Bob's revolvers went up and each flashed, while his spurs sunk deep and his splendid horse bounded up into the air with a snort of pain and fright. Then, like the wind, he rushed for the pass, and an arrow cut through his ear, while a shot tore through Pony Bob's arm.

Another arrow gave the Rider a wound, this time sinking into his leg.

With one arm useless now, Pony Bob fired with his left hand, and a yell of revengeful joy broke from his lips as he saw the Indian go down.

At the same time the masked man fired again, and Pony Bob reeled in his saddle as he felt the bullet tear through his body.

But he did not fall, and hurled his revolver in the face of the man who sprung to seize his bridle-rein.

It struck the mask fairly, just as the hand grasped the rein, and the outlaw was dragged to the ground with a force that stunned him, while Blackbird, bounding over him, went on in his mad rush.

"Brave pard!" cried Pony Bob, as he leant forward, cut his bridle-reins with his knife, and bound himself securely to the saddle-horn, while the repeating-rifle he had seen in the hand of the man behind him, rattled bullets after him in a dangerous style, for one clipped his horse, but only added to his speed, not wounding him severely.

"I'm done for, I fear, old pard but you'll take me to the fort," said Pony Bob, and every bound of his horse was agony to him, for he had received three wounds, the one in his body being, as he felt sure, fatal.

"On, old pard, on!" he urged.

The animal seemed to feel that he must go for all he could do, and needed no spur or whip.

On, on he went, leaving the scene of ambush and the ambushers far behind, and at last he swept out of the barren lands, reached the prairie, and soon after came in sight of the fort.

Pony Bob saw the flag floating in the breeze, the sentinel on the watch-tower, then the crowds gathering to welcome him in—now ahead of time nearly two hours.

Like a deer his horse ran, while the Rider reeled in his saddle, and but for being tied there would have fallen.

He clung hard, for he was growing weaker and faint, and could hardly keep his feet in the stirrups.

A moment more and the fort seemed to be far away, but he heard wild cheers, his horse halted and he knew no more.

"My God! he is shot to pieces!" cried an officer, who caught Pony Bob in his arms.

"Quick! Send him to Surgeon Powell!" another demanded.

"Brave Pony Bob! I fear it is your last ride," said Colonel Seeley, who had come hastily to the spot.

Surgeon Powell was on hand, and he had Pony Bob carried at once to his own quarters.

"He has been badly wounded, yet I hope we can save him," said Surgeon Powell, while, as the Pony Rider was now unconscious and could give no account of his ride, Colonel Seeley at once dispatched an officer over the trail with half a troop of cavalry, to know just what happened.

Then he sought the surgeon's quarters, his face anxious and lips sternly set.

There lay Pony Bob upon a cot, and with coat off and sleeves rolled up, Surgeon Powell was bending over him, a probe in his hand, while his assistants stood near ready to aid all in their power.

The surgeon saluted Colonel Seeley, but uttered no word, and the commandant watched him closely.

At last Surgeon Powell turned to his assistant and made some remark, and a surgical instrument was at once handed to him.

"The ball is here, just under his right shoulder. Had it gone an inch further it would have cut its way out—there it is," and he handed over the bullet to Colonel Seeley, having skillfully cut it from its resting-place.

"Will he live, Powell?" almost whispered the colonel.

"I believe he will, sir, for this is his worst wound, the bullet having touched no vital part as near as I can discover, now.

"The bullet wound in the shoulder, and arrow wound in the leg are of little moment compared with the one in the body.

"Pony Bob has an iron constitution, Colonel Seeley, and I believe will pull through; but he has had a close call, a very close call, and only his grit brought him here from the scene of the ambush."

"My daughter said that he was reeling wildly in his saddle as he came on, and then I knew that he must be severely wounded, 'poor fellow!'"

"But, do all in your power for him, Powell, and command me if I can be of service."

With this the colonel returned to his quarters, passing an officer on his way who told him that Pony Bob's horse had received three wounds also, though none of them severe.

"The brave boy was in close quarters, but came through," said the colonel as he joined Alice, who quickly asked:

"Will he live, father?"

"I hope so, and believe so from what Powell says, and he never misses it far in his diagnosis of a case, my child."

"Heaven grant it; but, who will now ride Pony Express, father?" and Alice seemed deeply interested in the answer.

"I have sent Curtis over the trail, Alice, with orders to go on to Jumping Off City and request the gambler to come to the fort, for he alone can I depend on now," answered Colonel Seeley;

and Alice, after a moment of hesitation, said:

"Father, I have kept something from you which now I will make known.

"Read this letter, please," and she placed in his hands an envelope deeply bordered with black.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GAMBLER ON PONY BOB'S TRAIL.

VELVET BILL had retired at a very late hour, as was his wont, but always sleeping lightly, he had expected to awaken about the time that Pony Bob put in an appearance at Jumping Off City.

This he did do, and was dressed and ready for the road when he looked at his very handsome watch and saw that the Pony Rider was just due.

He knew his watch was right, and as he did not hear the shout that generally greeted the Pony Rider, he said:

"He is behind time, for my watch is as true as the sun."

The truth was that all the possessions of the gambler were of the very best.

His boots, hat and clothes were all made to order in the East, and of the very best materials.

His watch had cost half a thousand dollars, and the chain about his neck was six feet long, massive and would hold up his weight.

The ruby he wore in his black scarf was a gem of rare scarlet luster; his sleeve-buttons were, the right hand representing the ace of diamonds in rubies, the left the ace of hearts in diamonds, and upon the little finger of his left hand he wore a solitaire of rare worth.

The fouraces pin which held up the rim of his hat, was a very costly affair, and as the gambler was known to always carry a large sum of gold about with him, he had been "spotted" as a mine worth working by those who preferred to kill and rob.

The want of success which these parties had met with, when they attempted to make the gambler their victim, was well known, and it deterred others from a like attempt.

Then, too, Velvet Bill's horses and equipments were of the best, and his saddle and weapons were silver-mounted.

Neat as a pin in his attire, courtly as a Chesterfield, handsome, a splendid physique, perfectly fearless, generous, to a fault and daring as Death, he was a man to admire, to fear, to wonder at, for his life was an unfathomable mystery.

Velvet Bill's valet was a Comanche Indian, and it was said that he neither spoke nor understood English, and the gambler asserted that there was no need that he should.

He always spoke to him in the Comanche tongue, and the Indian seldom opened his lips in the presence of others.

But he was as good as a French valet, keeping Velvet Bill's toilet in perfect trim, a perfect hostler, and that he had indomitable pluck and was a dead shot was known when one day the gambler got into trouble with a wild crowd who attempted to hang a man suspected of horse-stealing.

Velvet Bill had said:

"No, not until you have proof of his guilt," and trouble had followed which was never forgotten in Jumping Off City.

It was Velvet Bill's *débat*, so to speak, and the Comanche had backed him in his defense of the suspected man.

The result was a surprise to the mob, and Velvet Bill stock was quoted at the highest notch; but he gained his point, saved the man, who was afterward proven innocent, and like the generous man he was, paid all the burial expenses, which came high.

When ready for the road Velvet Bill went out of his quarters to get his breakfast, and said to a miner:

"Pony Bob is behind this morning."

"He went through here two hours ago, Pard Velvet."

"What?"

"It's so."

"Ahead of time?"

"Just so, pard."

"That is strange."

"I guesses he had special dispatches, for he was pushin' his critters mighty hard."

"Two hours ago, you say?"

"Yas, pard, all of it."

The gambler seemed surprised, but after a moment muttered:

"Fool! that was to keep me from going with him, and his life may be the forfeit."

"I will go to the fort."

He went in to his breakfast, ate heartily, and lighting a cigar went off to his stables.

Comanche was there with a horse ready saddled for him.

It was a splendid roan, showing speed, endurance and spirit.

The gambler said something to the Indian in a low tone and then returned to his cabin.

A few moments after Comanche led the roan to the door, and he had put a roll of blankets, wrapped in an india-rubber spread, behind the

saddle, and a haversack of provisions hung on one side, a lariat on the broad Mexican horn.

A pair of holster-revolvers were also visible, one on each side of the saddle-horn, and these preparations showed that Velvet Bill was going prepared for a long trail, if there was need for it.

Mounting, with another low word to the Comanche, he rode away at a walk, just four hours after the going of Pony Bob.

He took the Fatal Trail for Fort Venture, and, clearing the camps, glanced at the ground as he went along with the air of a man who could read "signs."

He did not quicken his pace until the last miner's cabin had been left a mile behind him, and then he urged his horse into a slow canter.

Glancing at the trail as he went along, he mused aloud:

"He was riding in a run here."

"He had some reason for his extra speed, to put one horse on this long run out at such a pace."

"Why did he not leave some word for me, if he did not wish to avoid me?"

"Well, I hope his going alone did not cost him his life, for Pony Bob is too daring and good a fellow to be picked off as the others have been."

"If others could only get the secret of Red Butterfly, they too could ride the Fatal Trail in comparative safety."

The roan seemed not to know what it was to feel fatigue, and kept up his steady lope wherever the nature of the trail permitted.

At last the gambler came to the grave of a Pony Rider, the nearest one toward Jumping Off City.

He glanced at it as he went by, read the name on the wooden head-board, and muttered:

"The Death Trail has commenced, for from here on the graves stand out like beacons on a channel."

"I only hope Pony Bob's grave is not to mark this Fatal Trail."

A few miles further on Velvet Bill halted at a stream for water and rest, intending also to eat his dinner and give his horse a chance to graze, for beyond for a long distance extended barren lands.

He had just staked his horse out, when he stopped and listened attentively.

"Cavalry! I fear this means that Pony Bob has gone under."

He seemed not at all disturbed, and, waiting, soon saw a party of cavalry come in sight.

An officer rode in front, and a scout by his side, while a score of troopers followed by fours.

As the scout pointed out Velvet Bill the pace of the troopers was increased, and soon they halted, the gambler raising his hat politely and saying, in his courteous way:

"Lieutenant Maybrick, I believe?"

"Yes, sir; and we have met before, and I am glad now to meet you again, as I had orders to go to Jumping Off City to see you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Velvet Bill, sir," was the smiling response of the gambler, when Lieutenant Maybrick hesitated over his name.

CHAPTER XVII.

READING "SIGNS."

"I AM glad that I have saved you a ride to the camps, sir, as you seek me," said the gambler, showing no surprise that he was sought after, though wondering at it.

"I will halt for rest, Velvet Bill—you see I call you by the name you request."

"Certainly; it is the only name I have—here."

"I will halt for rest and dinner, and we can talk over matters."

"With pleasure; and I have a haversack of provisions, if you will share them."

"Thank you; but I too am supplied, so we will join forces."

And the lieutenant led the way to a tree upon the banks of the stream where the gambler had placed his saddle and bridle.

The officer seemed to think it strange that Velvet Bill did not ask why he was in search of him; but the gambler showed not the slightest curiosity on that point.

When they were seated, and while an orderly was preparing dinner, Lieutenant Maybrick said:

"See here, Velvet Bill, did you know that two other Pony Riders had been shot of late?"

"Pony Bob told me that Pony Express Ben had gone under, and from your words, Lieutenant Maybrick, I take it that the other is poor Bob, who is also known as Black Horse Bob?"

"Yes; but I hope he will pull through, though he came to the fort tied to his saddle and desperately wounded."

"The brave fellow was grit indeed."

"He had three wounds, one serious, and his horse was also wounded three times, though slightly, and came to the fort in a full run."

"What did Pony Bob say?"

"Nothing, for he became unconscious the moment he had handed over his mail-pouches; but we found where he had been ambushed, and it was nearer the fort than the Ambushers have ever struck a victim before."

"They are growing bolder."
 "So it seems, and just when we supposed they had left the trails."
 "They must be made to leave them, sir."

"Yes, they must."
 "Did your scout say how many were in the party who attacked Pony Bob?"

"Yes, he counted them from signs as six in number, and they caught Pony Bob in close quarters, and how he got through I do not know."

"I will visit the place with you, sir, and see what I can read in the signs; but you do not know that Pony Bob was ambushed on his run from the fort to Jumping Off City?"

"No, is this so?"

"Yes, sir, and you must have passed the spot; near here it was."

"The scout saw signs, yet did not understand them."

"Perhaps I will be more fortunate in reading them, as Pony Bob told me of his being ambushed."

"I asked him to let me return with him on his run back, but for some reason he dodged me, going in two hours ahead of time."

"It was his pride, I suppose, to wish to take all chances alone, poor fellow."

"Yes, that is the way I regarded it, sir, and I only hope that his pride will not cost him his life."

"Is Surgeon Powell at the fort, may I ask?"

"Yes, and took Pony Bob in hand at once."

"Then I have hope of his recovery, if mortal man can save him."

The two now ate dinner together, and afterward the back trail was taken.

The spot of the first ambush of Pony Bob was reached, and the gambler dismounted and studied the situation as a child would a map.

At last he said, having gone over the whole scene, and read every sign, the scout and soldiers watching him with the deepest attention: "There were six in this party, and they were bunched together."

"One was certainly killed, for he fell there, see the stain, and he was carried yonder."

"That man killed was an Indian, or dressed as such, for see the bullet cut an arrow in two—here is the head."

"We will lose the trail yonder where it strikes the rocks, for nothing would leave a track on that land."

Then the gambler remounted and the party rode on until the scene of the second ambush was reached.

Here Velvet Bill again dismounted, and it took him a long while to go over the situation, all watching him as before.

At last he said:

"There were six in this party, too, and again one was killed, or seriously wounded," and he pointed to the stains.

"They, too, retreated to the bad lands and their trail cannot be followed."

"Pony Bob went through here at a rush, and there were men behind him, too, so he was caught in a double trap."

"How do you know there were men behind him, and in front of him, too?" asked Lieutenant Maybrick.

"Here is an arrow that was fired from yonder point, behind him, and that bullet is flattened out against the rock, showing it came from this direction, as did also two arrows I picked up."

"Yes, there were ambushers here, and they closed in behind him from yonder rocks, to make it doubly sure to kill him."

"And he got through?"

"Yes, there is no telling what a brave man can do until he is put to it," was the quiet response, and the young officer recalled the many stories he had heard of what Velvet Bill had done when "put to it."

"Well," he said, "we will ride on to the fort now, for I think you have read the signs thoroughly, and Colonel Seeley wished me to ask you to come to the fort to see him, and that was why I was going to Jumping Off City."

"I intended to go on to the fort, for I felt anxious about Pony Bob, and more, I believed the Secret Assassins of the Trails were gone forever; but it seems they are not, so they must be wiped out."

"But how?"

"I believe I will undertake the work," was Velvet Bill's quiet response.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE AMBUSHERS' THREAT.

WHEN Alice Seeley handed the letter to her father, with the remark that she had held a secret from him, his fine face was crossed by a look of anxiety, for he seemed to know instinctively what she meant.

The letter was inclosed in a large envelope, which had been bordered with black, like a mourning envelope.

The address was written in red ink and was as follows:

"To Miss Alice Seeley,

"Fort Venture."

Opening the letter the colonel saw a very artistic sketch, as far as the execution went, of a grave, with himself kneeling by the side of it.

It was a sketch of a scene in the pretty burying-ground of the fort, upon the river-bank, and the one who wielded the pencil was certainly a skilled artist.

But the headstone of the grave was what riveted the attention of the colonel, for thereon was the lettering:

"ALICE SEELEY.

"Born May 1st, 18—."

"Killed by Unknown Assassins, July 4th, 18—."

The colonel uttered a sound between a moan and an oath, and read, written in a bold hand:

"WARNING!

"If Colonel Seeley sends again for Go-won-go, the Indian Pony Rider, to ride Express, and failing to secure him, asks Velvet Bill to do the work, you, Alice Seeley, are booked as the victim of the Secret Assassins of the Fatal Trail."

"This is no idle threat, and that it can be carried out you will see by the fact that this warning is pinned to the pillow of your bed in your own room."

"Look upon the sketch here given and be warned, for the Unknown Ambushers do not wish to make war against a woman, and it is the duty of the Pony Riders to take their chances in riding the trails."

Throwing himself into a chair, when he had read this precious threat through, Colonel Seeley again slowly perused it, this time aloud.

Then he looked up and met the eyes of his daughter fixed upon him.

His face was white as a sheet now, his lips set firmly, and his eyes fairly blazed.

At last he said:

"When did you get this, Alice?"

"The night after Pony Rider Ben was killed."

"Where did you get it?"

"It was pinned to my pillow in my room."

"You found it there when you went to bed?"

"No, father."

"Tell me all about it, Alice?"

"I awoke in the night from some cause, and my hand touched it."

"I was surprised, and arose, lighted my lamp and saw what it was."

"Then some one entered your room when you were asleep and placed it there?"

"It could only be so, father."

"Would you have seen it when you retired, had it been there?"

"Yes, sir, for it was upon the pillow on which my head rested, and besides I removed the embroidered pillow shams, and certainly would have seen it then."

"Did you speak to Valerie, your maid, about it?"

"I did not, sir, but—"

"But what, Alice?"

"I showed it to Surgeon Powell, and he asked me to let him take it to Buffalo Bill."

"I did so, but swore them both to secrecy, as I did not wish to alarm you, until there was need for action."

"And what had Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill to say about it?"

"They were to have gone with the expedition, you know, sir, up to the Indian country, but both got excused, and I know it was to watch over me, for they asked me to report to one of them every movement of all about the headquarters and my own going and coming."

"And you have done so?"

"I have, sir, and for Pony Bob's sake I am glad now that Surgeon Powell did not go."

"And for your sake, too, my child, for if any one can save you those two men can."

"If this was a threat from outside I would not take it so much to heart; but when left as it was at night, it does show that the writer has the power to carry his threat into execution."

"I will have your room guarded at night, and—"

"A scout is on duty, sir, every night within call, for Cody placed him there."

"That is just what he should have done, and I'll see there are others near to aid him."

"That is done, sir, for Surgeon Powell sent two soldiers as nominal nurses to Captain Vance, whose rooms command a view of my piazza, and one is on duty constantly, under the plea of catching a thief."

"You did wisely to consult Powell and Cody, my child, for they have acted well."

"But I, too, shall be on guard, and I think it best you should change your sleeping-room."

"I have slept in the spare chamber each night since, sir, as Surgeon Powell bade me do."

"Then I will take your room, and if we cannot catch this assassin who has the run of my quarters, I will be very much surprised, for I shall put Velvet Bill on as Pony Express Rider against all such threats, if he will ride."

"If I am not mistaken, father, he promised Go-won-go he would do so, if the Ambushers appeared again, and I am glad that that hideous warning against my life does not frighten you from your purpose."

"No; I am the more determined to hunt them down!" was the stern response of Colonel Seeley.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VOLUNTEER.

"LIEUTENANT MAYBRICK has returned, sir, and Velvet Bill is with him," said the colonel's orderly, as at a late hour he sat with his daughter, endeavoring to formulate some plan by which those who meant harm to her might be entrapped.

"Ah! admit them at once: but what remarkable time Maybrick made to be on a scout," said the colonel.

Then, as Alice arose to depart, he continued: "Remain, Alice, for I expect no reports which you may not hear."

Alice Seeley resumed her seat, and she was glad to do so, for she wished to see the gambler again—the one who was to go upon a trail which was fatal to all, it seemed.

A moment after Lieutenant Maybrick and the gambler entered.

The latter bowed courteously to Alice and accepted the offered hand of Colonel Seeley like one who felt that he was not being favored.

"My daughter, you have met, I believe, sir," said the colonel.

"I have had that honor, sir."

And Velvet Bill again bowed and took the seat the colonel motioned him to, and the light fell full upon his fine face.

"What a face for a man of his character to possess," mused Alice.

"Now, Lieutenant Maybrick, permit me to hear your report, and I congratulate you upon your very quick trip."

"I did not go to Jumping Off City, Colonel Seeley, as I met Velvet Bill on his way to the fort."

"Indeed! that was fortunate, for I am anxious to have a talk with the gentleman."

"My report, sir, is quickly made, for we made no discoveries to speak of, until after we met Velvet Bill, when he read the signs for us with apparent ease, and he had better be the one to tell you, sir, of what we saw."

"I would be glad if you would do so, Velvet Bill."

"There is little to tell, Colonel Seeley, more than that I heard from Pony Bob of the death of Pony Express Ben, and said that I would return with him to the fort."

"For some reason he gave me the go-by, passing two hours ahead of time."

"When I discovered this I mounted and took his trail, to find that he was pressing his horse hard all along."

"Then I met Lieutenant Maybrick, sir, and discovered where Pony Bob had been ambushed on his ride down, and also on his run back."

"Was he ambushed on his ride to Jumping Off City, sir?"

"Yes, sir, for this he told me; but he got through without a scratch, and killed one of his enemies."

"Good! and coming back?"

"By a strange coincidence, sir, he was again able to get through, though not without severe wounds, I am told, and again he killed one of his foes."

"And their bodies?"

"Are not to be found, sir, of course."

"Why of course?"

"Because the Ambushers have a way to conceal their dead as thoroughly as they do themselves, Colonel Seeley."

"And how did you know Pony Bob killed two men?"

"He told me that he thought he killed one going down, and there was the trace."

"The other I am not sure of, but he certainly wounded him severely to judge from the loss of blood shown."

"And you could not follow the red trail thus left?"

"To the bad lands, yes, sir, but not beyond."

"This is a remarkable affair, how those Ambushers remain unknown and cover up their tracks even better than red-skins can do."

"They must be tracked down, sir," was the response of the gambler.

"That is just it; but by whom? for Buffalo Bill has his scouting work to do, the soldiers have all they can handle in safety, and these fellows set me at defiance."

The gambler made no reply, and Lieutenant Maybrick arose to depart, with the remark:

"If you have no orders, Colonel Seeley, I will ask to be excused, for I kept my men waiting in the saddle until I reported."

"Dismiss them to their quarters, sir, and you can seek the rest you must need."

The lieutenant bowed, and Velvet Bill arose, as though to also depart, when Colonel Seeley said:

"I would have you remain, sir, if you please."

The gambler bowed and resumed his seat, and when Lieutenant Maybrick had gone, Colonel Seeley said:

"There was one person I placed perfect confidence in, Velvet Bill—by the way, give me another name to call you by, for you are not the man to apply a camp-name to such as you are known by."

"I have only the one name out here, Colonel Seeley, unless it is those of gambler and poker—"

sharp, for I am a professional gambler, I believe you know, sir."

"You either are, sir, or you are playing your cards to win some deep game known only to yourself; but the one to whom I referred was Red Butterfly, the Indian Pony Rider, and he told me when leaving, and told my daughter here, to trust you as we would himself."

"He was very complimentary, sir; but may I ask if there is any service I can render you which you would call upon the Red Butterfly to do were he here?"

"There is, sir."

"I will be glad to know it, Colonel Seeley."

"To ride Pony Express from here to Dismal City."

"I am sorry, sir, but I can only accept the position until you can secure other Riders."

The colonel thrust his hand into his pocket and handed over the black-rimmed envelope containing the Ambushers' threat against Alice.

The gambler read it through with a face unchanged, and then said, and his voice was very stern now:

"Since you have shown me this, Colonel Seeley, I retract my words and accept the position of Pony Rider."

CHAPTER XX.

THE GAMBLER'S TERMS.

THE manner in which Velvet Bill had declined the position of Pony Rider, told both Colonel Seeley and Alice that he meant just what he said, and remembering the threat of the Secret Assassins, the maiden was rather glad that he had so decided.

But Colonel Seeley believed that it would be through Velvet Bill's riding the trail that the Ambushers would be discovered, and, recalling what Go-won-go had said, he decided to press the gambler to do so.

"If the Ambushers should return to the trail, sir, and begin their red work again, send for Velvet Bill and trust him as you would me," Go-won-go had said, to Colonel Seeley.

To Alice he had said:

"There is one man outside of this fort whom you can trust in all things."

"It is Velvet Bill, the Gambler, and don't forget that I tell you so."

So it was that the colonel had suddenly sprung upon the gambler the threatening communication of the Unknown Ambushers.

Both the colonel and Alice had a perfect view of the face of the man as he read the letter, for the lamplight fell full upon it.

They did not see the twitching of a nerve, the change of an expression when he opened the paper and then read it.

They were both, therefore, surprised when he had so suddenly volunteered to make the ride.

His voice, ever low and musical, had suddenly changed, too, and he spoke like one who was deeply moved in spite of his emotionless face.

"Do you mean it?" cried the colonel, with some show of excitement.

"I do, sir."

"But you just said—"

"It was before you showed me this very artistic drawing and this threat."

"That decides you, then?"

"It does."

"You mean that you will take Pony Bob's place?"

"I do, sir. I shall go on the run when the time comes to start."

"It should have been to-night, sir, for the long stops the Riders made at Dismal City, following the example of the Red Butterfly."

"I will start, sir, within ten minutes; but for the first ride must take the horses of Pony Bob."

"Your horses are at Jumping Off City, you mean?"

"I have horses there, sir, at Miner's Roost, and also at Dismal City, in case I might need them, for I have done so in the past."

"The Pony Rider's horses are at your service, sir, as also my own, if you wish."

"Thank you, colonel; but I will leave my roan here, and take one of Pony Bob's horses to Jumping Off City."

"I am ready to start, sir, whenever the pouches are given me."

The colonel called his orderly and ordered that the mail be sent at once to him, while he made up the official pouch and said:

"Now, Velvet Bill, I wish to ask you what you think of this threat against my daughter?"

"I should say, sir, that Miss Seeley cannot be too closely guarded."

"And your riding will give them a chance to carry out their threat?"

"It seems so, sir."

"You do not think then it is meant as a bluff?"

"I am sure that it is not, sir."

"You are fully aware of the risk then she runs by your putting the threat at defiance and riding Pony Express?"

"I am, sir, and you understand the danger too, Miss Seeley?"

"Fully, sir."

"And are willing to face the consequences?"

"If you deem best, yes, sir."

"It is best, for perhaps that is the only way

to make these Ambushers show their hands, and thus give us a hold upon them."

"That is just my idea, Velvet Bill; but you fully understand the risks you run too?" said Colonel Seeley.

"Pony Bob was victim Number Seventeen, I believe, sir?" was the cool response to the question.

"Yes, if he dies he will be the seventeenth Rider who has been slain, and though Buffalo Bill escaped it was for some reason known to the Ambushers alone."

"Red Butterfly was wounded, but escaped death, and you have ridden the trail for Go-won-go and have thus far been spared."

"Such is the situation, except that the Ambushers, for some secret reason, seem to dread your riding the trail, and to prevent it threaten to make my daughter the victim."

"Well, Colonel Seeley, I have your daughter's permission to ride, it is your wish for me to do so, and I am willing to take all chances," and the gambler smiled in his serene way, as many had seen him smile when he was playing a winning game of cards, or stood at bay against big odds.

Then he said, as though the thought had suddenly crossed his mind:

"But, Colonel Seeley, permit me to say that I ride without pay and at my own expense, while I am to have orders from you to call upon any officer, soldier or scout as I may need their services?"

"It shall be as you wish, sir."

"Then as the pouches are ready for me, sir, I am ready for the ride."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LONE RIDER.

WHETHER it was nervousness upon her own account, at the Ambushers being defied, or at seeing another man start upon a ride that seemed to lead only to the grave, Alice Seeley fairly shivered, as with cold, when the gambler arose to go.

Colonel Seeley seemed also to be impressed with a feeling of dread which he could not shake off.

So often had it been the same story to tell, "Another Pony Rider dead," that he shrank from seeing Velvet Bill start upon the run with more fear than he would have felt for himself.

The pouches had been sent over from the postmaster, Pony Bob's best horse stood at the door, and Colonel Seeley had placed his official papers in the leather sack when Velvet Bill arose ready for the road, simply remarking to the orderly:

"It was my saddle and bridle, of course, that was placed upon Pony Bob's horse?"

"Yes, sir, I so gave the order, though you said nothing about it," and the orderly saluted the gambler with a deference scarcely less than he showed the colonel.

The truth was Velvet Bill was already a hero at Fort Venture, and a man willing to put himself up for death to claim as "Pony Rider Seventeen, Victim of the Secret Assassins," was a wonderful personage in the eyes of all.

But Velvet Bill was as cool as an icicle, and as Alice Seeley advanced and offered her hand he saw her emotion, and said pleasantly:

"Have no fear, Miss Seeley, for all will come well in the end."

"I hope so."

"May Heaven guard you, Velvet Bill, will be my heartfelt prayer."

"Miss Seeley," and the voice of the gambler was fervent now, "that is the first prayer that was ever offered for me in all my life."

"Not not surely not, for your mother certainly prayed for you in your childhood," said Alice, almost frightened by his words.

"No, Miss Seeley, my mother never uttered a prayer for me in infancy, boyhood or manhood"—then quickly the voice changed again, and he said almost sternly:

"I am ready, Colonel Seeley."

"I hate to see you go, Velvet Bill; but I shall hope for the best."

"Good-by," and the colonel grasped the hand of the gambler warmly.

"I am starting just six hours late, sir," and glancing at his watch, Velvet Bill bowed and strode from the room.

The colonel and Alice followed him, and the moon just rising, showed a group of officers standing near to see the gambler depart, for all knew now that Velvet Bill had come to defy fate and make the ride.

Many knew him, some to their cost, when they had played cards with him, and a pleasant greeting was extended and kind wishes for his safety followed him.

He examined his saddle trappings, like one who knew that life might depend upon them, strapped on the pouches, and mounted the tall black horse brought for him.

He was a superb rider, sat in the saddle with perfect grace, and raising his hat to the group of officers, said pleasantly:

"Good night, gentlemen."

Then the big black felt the touch of the spur and bounded forward like a rocket.

The stockade gate was thrown open, out of

real respect the sentinel saluted the flying horseman, and Velvet Bill was away on his mad ride over the Fatal Trail.

The colonel and Alice watched him go down the hill with a rush, and saw the dark form grow smaller and smaller until it could no longer be seen upon the prairie.

"Oh, father! has he too gone to his death?" cried Alice, her hands clasped together, her eyes raised, as though in her heart was a silent prayer for the safety of the daring rider.

"Let us hope not, Alice, and really I feel not, now, for if the Ambushers did not fear that Velvet Bill could, as Go-won-go did, elude them in some way, why did they make that threat against you if he rode?"

"There is some comfort in that thought, father; for him at least," she added.

"I so consider it, and somehow he does not seem to me to be a man to fall a victim to assassins."

"To me he is a mystery, and though a self-confessed gambler and the hero of many a sad duel on the border, I respect him as I would a superior officer that commanded my highest esteem."

"I have the same feeling, father, and to me also he is a mystery unfathomable."

"I have never heard a word against his honor, and his acts of good, his charity to the needy, are well known."

"He gambles, yet hosts of splendid fellows do the same, and are not as frank about it as he always is."

"He is a winner three-fourths of the time, and no one ever hinted that he played other than a perfectly honest game."

"You know what Pony Bob heard in the camps, of his taking up for that young miner against the three most desperate men in the mines, winning back all they had cheated their victim out of, giving it to him though he had risked his money to do it, and then driving the Three Terrors out of the camps."

"Somehow I do not believe that such a man will die by the hand of an assassin," and the colonel spoke warmly.

Then he kissed his daughter good-night, and each retired to their rooms, neither dreaming what another night would bring to them of sorrow and pain.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHY SPARED?

VELVET BILL found, before he went very far, that the horse he was riding was a good one, and he knew that Pony Bob was said to always have only the best of animals.

He slackened his pace after a mile or so, for the long ride before him, and coming to the scene where Pony Bob had been fired upon and wounded, he went along at a walk.

The moon, rising very late and on the wane, yet gave him light enough to see the trail and surrounding country, but the shadows even looked blacker by the golden light.

He approached the pass, which was the favorite ambush of the Trail Assassins, with his right hand upon the butt of the large revolver in his saddle-holster.

His piercing eyes searched the shadows, but he never faltered, though he could not but know that in the full glare of the moonlight as he was, any one crouching among the rocks sixty feet away on either side would be able to riddle his heart with bullets.

But on he rode, and passed on out of a danger he could not see, but which was there.

Crouching behind the rocks upon either side, and with weapons ready to kill were half a dozen men.

Four were Indians, two were white men, the same two whom the reader has before seen upon the Fatal Trail.

There was a white man upon either side of the pass, and an Indian mounted upon a rock had given a signal of the approach of the Pony Rider.

"He is very late; but who have they got, for Pony Bob, if not dead, certainly was too badly wounded to ride," said the leader, and he addressed the man known as Powder Face.

"Maybe it's Buffalo Bill," said Powder Face.

"No, Colonel Seeley would not dare send him."

"It might be a soldier, cap'n."

"Not one could be found to make the ride, nor a scout either, for brave as they are, it gives them no chance for life as they all know."

"Waal, it be somebody, cap'n, and I guesses I better git back inter ambush."

"Do so, but do not fire, or allow your redskins to do so, until you get the signal from me, for I wish to see who it is that I am going to kill."

"Yas, cap'n," and the man hastily crossed to his retreat among the rocks.

The Indian sentinel had descended from his point of lookout, and no one would have dreamed of danger lurking among the shadows of the pass.

The horseman was now near, and coming along slowly.

The moon shone full in his face, and he rode

like one who held no fear, yet was ready to meet a foe if one appeared.

The "captain" eyed him closely, then suddenly raised to his eyes a field glass.

One good look and from his lips came the words:

"My God! it is Velvet Bill.

"Colonel Seeley has defied me!"

He laid his glass down, he did not raise his weapon, he gave no signal to fire.

And all unconscious that half a dozen pairs of eyes were upon him, Velvet Bill rode into the pass, glancing keenly into the shadows of the rocks and passed on to safety.

When his retreating form was disappearing from sight, Powder Face came from his hiding-place and crossed over to where his leader was.

It was evident that he was surprised, and the Indians were disappointed and showed it.

The captain was not one to show mercy, and yet with a man wholly in his power, without danger to himself or his men, he had allowed Velvet Bill to pass unscathed through his ambush.

What did it mean? Powder Face wished to know, and so came to ask.

He knew who it was, and his eyes had caught the sparkle of the ruby in his scarf, the glinting of the moonlight upon the gold chain.

"I say, cap'n, yer told me that Buf'ler Bill saved yer life once, and yer'd die afore yer would kill him on ther trail, whether he rode Pony Express or not.

"Then I knows that ther Red Butterfly escaped being killed, but it wasn't through your showin' him mercy, but beka'se he were one too many fer yer.

"But what are ther charm o' Velvet Bill thet yer spares him?"

"Lets him ride right by, and he worth in gold-belt, diamonds and sich, more money than any man in ther mines.

"Why, I come in an ace of letting go at him, for he are our bitter foe, and he'd 'a' made us rich and costin' only one life."

"By the God above, man, had you killed Velvet Bill, I would have given you to my Indians to burn you to death at the stake," came the savage response of the captain of the Assassins, and Powder Face shrunk from before his blazing eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RIDE THROUGH.

"YER hain't pony-ridin' ag'in, Pard Velvet, is yer?" asked a miner standing before the tavern door, as the gambler came into Jumping Off City with a rush and dismounted, for he had to keep up the "style" of the Overland Riders.

"Yes, I am at it again."

"Yer wants ter commit suicide, then?"

"Oh no."

"Waal, what be yer leetle game ter throw away yer life?"

"Somehow I don't think I shall go under on the trail, pard."

"Waal, ef yer don't, yer'll be like thet Red-skin Rider they c'u'dn't kill."

"I hope so," and with this the gambler sent to Comanche to bring him one of his own horses, and he went in to breakfast.

He had made up an hour on the time, and was hoping to arrive at Dismal City not very far behind schedule time by hard riding.

He was soon well mounted again and off, while a large crowd of miners stood gazing after him and predicting that he would not live a week.

Unmindful of their predictions, Velvet Bill went along at a tremendous pace.

He rode easily, held his horse well in hand, lifting him over bad ground, and almost walking up-hill, trotting down by the side of the animal.

The relay stations, where the coaches and Riders changed horses between Jumping Off City and Miner's Roost, supplied him with fresh mounts; and just at sunset he rode up to the Overland Lodge, and the cry at once went around:

"Velvet Bill is ridin' Pony Express!"

"Now, Ambushers, jist stand from under!"

He was greeted with a yell by the Miner's Roost people, and ate a hearty supper, when again he mounted and started on his perilous run.

But before he left, Jerry Thomas, the landlord of the Overland, said:

"See here, Velvet, those Terrors you sent out of your camps have put up at Dismal City."

"They are there, then, Jerry?"

"Yes, and you must look out for them, as they talked awful ugly about you, when they were here, making all kinds of threats."

"I thank you, Jerry, and I'll look out for them."

"You'd better, for they could waylay you on the road, now they know you are riding Pony Express."

"True, they could do that."

"Good-night, and thank you again, Jerry."

With this the gambler rode on his way.

He changed horses at the stations between Miner's Roost and Dismal City, and as he drew

near the latter camps flitted by the coach going in like a phantom horseman.

Sunset Sam, the crack driver of the Overland, and the "boss of good fellows," was on the box, and called out as was his wont, when the Riders passed him:

"Hello! and luck to yer, Pony Bob!"

"It is not Pony Bob, Sam," came back to him, as the horseman flew on.

"Waal, hev they kilt Pony Bob?"

"Now, who in thunder were thet, for it wasn't Pony Bob fer a fact."

"Maybe it were Buf'ler Bill, though it didn't sound like his voice."

"But I'll soon know," and Sunset Sam sent his team rapidly along the trail.

The lights of the camps, when the taverns and saloons of Dismal City were in full blast, soon came in sight, and ten minutes after Sam halted before the stage station, threw his reins upon the backs of his wheelers, and getting down from his box, was met by the "boss," as the station-master was called.

"Say, boss, who were ther Pony Rider jist come in?" asked Sunset Sam.

"It was Velvet Bill."

Sam gave a shrill whistle.

"I see; but does that mean poor Pony Bob has turned up his toes?"

"Velvet says he was ambushed and badly wounded, but he hopes he will recover."

"He carried the pouches into the fort after he had received three wounds, and his horse caught it, too."

"Bully fer Pony Bob!"

"But he were ther one I know'd would do it, and I only hopes he will git well."

"But, whar is Velvet Bill?"

"He has gone in to get something to eat, and will then go to the saloon for a game, he said."

"I'll j'ine him in ther eatin', an' then in ther keerds; but fu'st I must wash ther dust out o' my throat with a leetle rum."

"But, boss, hain't ther Terrors here?"

"Yes, they are in the saloon gambling now."

"Waal, I guess they are the ones Velvet Bill wants ter git inter a game with, fer they has it in fer him, I hear."

"Ah! I had not thought of that."

"I will see Velvet Bill at once and tell him, as he is riding Pony Express now, he must not seek trouble with them, though, of course, if they attack him it is different."

"He never s'arches fer trouble, boss; but he be a mighty convenient man ter find when folks as wants a row is round lookin' fer one."

"Well, come in and get your supper; but what will you do, Sunset Sam, at the other end of your trail, if Velvet Bill is ambushed, for I do not believe another rider can be found?"

"Boss, somehow I doesn't think Velvet Bill is ther man ter be kilt," and Sam entered the room where the gambler was enjoying what might be termed a very late supper or very early breakfast, for it was a couple of hours after midnight.

He greeted Sunset Sam pleasantly, and then heard what the boss had to say about keeping out of trouble.

"I don't think they are as dangerous as the Fatal Trail, boss; but I'll not seek trouble with them, I promise you," was the gambler's reply.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

THERE was a painful suspense at Fort Venture, for the reason that every man who rode Pony Express was now looked upon as doomed to death.

That the Red Butterfly had escaped death had been the wonder of every officer and man at the fort.

Pony Bob lay hovering between life and death, and only a few days before Pony Express Ben had been slain.

Now, in the face of the doom of others, another bold spirit, had been found to ride the Fatal Trail.

That one was a man popular with officers, soldiers, scouts and miners alike, and he was voted by one and all a gentleman.

Now he had gone upon his ride of peril, and would he return in life, was the cause of the general suspense.

The morning after his departure dawned bright and beautiful, but it did not dispel the shadows resting upon the hearts of all.

The day dragged away, and toward night a slow rain set in, driving all indoors, save the sentinels, for a keen wind was blowing down from the snow-clad mountain-tops.

Fort Venture was situated upon a river, as has been said, and that a foe would ever attack from the water not one in the barracks ever believed.

It seemed useless, then, for the sentinels to keep their eyes upon the river.

Had they done so, even, they could not have seen in the darkness and rain a boat drifting down the stream.

It was the same color as the river, lay low in the water and had a covering of canvas over it.

But it was guided by some agency unseen, and moved toward the bank where it came to a standstill.

Then a form came out from under the canvas, and stepping ashore revealed a tall form, wearing a long military coat and slouch hat.

That he was an officer no one would have doubted.

He made his way up the bank to the parade-ground, crossed this and stood near the quarters of Colonel Seeley.

He had seemed to know the fort well, had avoided the sentinels, and now stood watching the headquarters, where a light was yet visible, though it was midnight.

After awhile he walked around the quarters just as the light disappeared from the window.

There was a sentinel upon the front piazza, and that was all, and the rain drove him under shelter.

To the rear of the quarters the cloaked stranger walked with silent tread and for a long while stood there, as patiently waiting as an Indian would have done.

At length a rear door opened slowly and a cloaked form stepped out into the pelting rain.

"I am here," said the man in the cloak.

"Come in," replied the other.

He obeyed, but asked:

"What have you done?"

"Everything necessary."

"Good!"

And then the two passed on into the rear of Colonel Seeley's quarters.

In five minutes the door reopened and the two came out, but the man in the cloak and his companion too were both carrying heavy bundles, it seemed.

In silence they moved away, going across the parade toward the barracks of the soldiers, but turning off and walking toward the river-bank.

Down this they went, and reaching the boat they both placed their bundles beneath the canvas covering.

Then the one who had come out of the colonel's quarters got in also under the shelter.

In silence then the boat moved away, and went on down the stream, and its powers of locomotion were then seen to be a man swimming along on each side of it near the bow.

The current carried it swiftly down the stream, and for an hour not a word was spoken.

Then the man in the cloak arose in the stern of the boat, and revealed a lantern which he waved once in a circle.

It was answered by a red light being shown upon a dark mass of rock, and then it descended toward the waters.

The boat was steered toward the lantern, and a platform was revealed, lowered by ropes from the overhanging cliff above.

The boat was made fast to the swinging platform, and the one in the boat was told to get upon it.

Then a large bundle was placed there which was now seen to be a human form.

"All right," said the man in the cloak, and the platform was drawn upward, the boat being held to the rocky cliff.

Soon it descended again, and the man in the cloak took a bundle from the boat and placed it upon the platform, upon which he now stepped, and it went upward a second time.

A third time it descended, and the two swimmers got upon it, the boat was then seen to be made of painted canvas, and was folded up and taken upon the lift, which once more was drawn up by some power on the cliff.

CHAPTER XXV.

KIDNAPPED.

COLONEL SEELEY was an early riser, and a light sleeper, but he had pleased to lie in bed the morning following the storm, so the cook told the orderly who wondered at not seeing the commandant.

And the cook continued with a rich brogue, for she was a native of Ireland who had followed her husband across the sea and then into the army of the United States:

"An' that lazy snip of a maid is still asl'ape, same as ther young missus, so ther whole place be after bein' as still as a cemetery this mornin', Misther Orderly."

"See here, Mrs. Moriarty, a courier has come in from the force up in the Indian country, and the officer of the day told me to bring these dispatches at once to the colonel, so you must wake him up."

"If yez says so, Misther Orderly, I obeys orders," replied Mrs. Moriarty, and forthwith she went to the door of the colonel's room.

But it took very loud knocking to get a response.

At last, however, the colonel called out:

"Who is there?"

"It's me, sur, Mrs. Moriarty, for the orderly is here with papers, sur."

"All right, send him in, and have me a cup of coffee at once, for I feel strangely ill this morning."

"Yis, sur," and Mrs. Moriarty ushered in the orderly.

"Ah, orderly, I am blind with the headache and do not know what to make of it—yes, and I am very dizzy, for see, I can hardly stand."

"There is a very strange odor in the room,

sir; like chloroform it is, sir," said the orderly, how had once been a hospital steward.

"Chloroform! Hal you are right.

"Great God! see if my child is in her room, orderly!"

The orderly called Mrs. Moriarty at once, and the colonel tottered about trying to dress himself.

In a moment the orderly returned.

"No, sir, she is not there, nor can her maid be found.

"Mrs. Moriarty has seen neither of them this morning, sir."

Colonel Seeley was staggered, as though from a heavy blow; but he quickly collected himself and said:

"Send the officer of the day here, and also my adjutant, at once.

"Then have Surgeon Powell come to me, and Scout Cody as well.

"Quick!"

The orderly darted away, and with an effort the colonel went on with his toilet.

The officer of the day soon came, and Colonel Seeley asked quickly:

"What time is it, Captain Cameron?"

"Half-past seven, sir."

"Then you were on duty last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen Miss Seeley this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Nor last night?"

"Not after I left your quarters at nine, sir."

"See if she has left the fort and report at once, she and her maid Valerie, for I have been chloroformed, my child is gone, and—But go!"

Captain Cameron, in almost dismay, dashed from the room, just as the adjutant came hurriedly in.

But he knew nothing of what had happened, and went off to see if he could make any discovery.

Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill came together, and they were startled by the colonel's white, haggard face.

"Surgeon Powell, I was wrong to tell you last night that I would be able to protect my daughter from harm, and for you and Cody to withdraw your men, for I have been chloroformed, and Alice has been kidnapped I am sure, while her maid Valerie is also missing.

"I know what you and Cody are, and I turn to you both for help in my great sorrow and suffering."

The surgeon and the scout were almost dazed with amazement.

It was true that the colonel had told them only the night before that there could be no possible danger to his daughter, with a sentinel placed at night on his piazza, and his room so near to the one Miss Seeley occupied, while her maid was within easy call.

But certain it was that Alice Seeley was not in her home, and the officer of the day came back to report that she had not left the fort, nor had her maid been seen.

An alarm was at once sounded, every officer's quarters and even the soldiers' barracks were searched, but no clew could be found to the missing ones.

It was evident that both Alice and her maid had retired for the night; their beds showed this much; but they had risen and dressed themselves, and more, a search revealed that they had both taken a number of things from their wardrobe.

They had not passed the sentinel at the front door, and Mrs. Moriarty, who had her own quarters, said she had found the rear door unlocked for her, as was the custom.

She had not seen Valerie about, and had been grumbling at her for her laziness.

A bottle labeled "Chloroform" was found in the room of Miss Seeley, and the whole house was permeated with it.

But how had the colonel's daughter and her maid left the house without being seen, and even had they left the quarters unseen, how could it be possible for them to get out of the fort?

The sentinels at the several stockade gates vowed they had not passed them; they could not, unaided, have scaled the stockade walls, and on the river there was not a single boat.

"The Assassins have kept their cruel threat because I allowed Velvet Bill to ride Pony Express," groaned Colonel Seeley in agony of mind, and not a word could any one utter to comfort him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST HOPE.

IT WAS NO USE to search, no use to hope against hope that Alice Seeley would be found about the fort, for that was given up by all except a few who could not realize how she had been spirited away as she had been.

But it was plain enough to those who looked closely into the matter.

That Colonel Seeley had been chloroformed there was no shadow of doubt, and the young girl and her maid must have been quieted in the same manner, for no outcry had been heard by the sentinel on duty at headquarters.

It was true that there was a rain storm; but, then, how had any one entered the fort, and left it with two captives and not be seen?

There were the soldiers on duty, officers crossing the Parade, and visiting, the guard on its rounds and the sentinels on their posts, and yet the captives had been taken from the fort.

Was there a traitor in camp?

It certainly looked so.

But who was that traitor?

Not a suspicion rested upon a soul in the fort, and who could have been so cruel as to kidnap a young girl to deliver her into the hands of the Secret Assassins.

There were scouting parties sent out at once, one guided by Buffalo Bill, another by Surgeon Frank Powell, the two best trailers on the frontier, it was said.

A courier was also sent to the command then in the field to return to the fort, but to break up in parties and thus search as they came back for some trace of the kidnappers and their victims.

After the first shock was over, and the effect of the drug upon him had passed away, Colonel Seeley rose grandly to meet the situation.

He became perfectly calm, cool and determined, and he issued his orders and devoted himself to his duties as though he was not the one most deeply hurt by the affair which cast a gloom upon all, down to the smallest child and humblest hanger-on about the fort.

For some reason the colonel hung to a strong hope in Velvet Bill, and longed for his return from his ride, if come back he did in safety.

"That man may help me, may save her," he said to himself, time and again.

The days passed away, the command patrolling in the Indian country had come in by squads until all had returned, Surgeon Powell's party had gotten back, and Buffalo Bill and his men were all that still remained out, and hope hung high that they had made some discovery.

Surgeon Powell reported that he had taken the river-shore down, for he seemed to cling to the idea that the kidnappers had come by water.

"But there were no boats in the country," was urged.

He admitted that none were known of, yet he said that a raft of logs could come down and find a landing, such a dark night of rain as the one in question had been, and though there were sentinels at each water end of the stockade walls, they could not have seen out upon the river twenty feet.

Anyhow, he took the idea that the kidnappers had come that way, and so he led his party down the river.

After some miles the river-bank became very wild and rocky, then merged into lofty cliffs, which prevented any landing.

The Surgeon Scout halted, when he could follow the shore no further, and soon made a raft, upon which he, with two others, were to embark.

The rest of the party were divided, some put across the river on the raft, to go on down, flanking the cliffs, and gaining the stream again at a point a dozen miles below.

The other half of the party were to do the same on that shore of the river.

So they set off, and the Surgeon Scout and his two companions pushed into the stream on their raft, which had been very securely made of logs.

The current bore them swiftly along, and the three eyed the banks like hawks.

But no break was seen, only lofty, wall-like cliffs, here and there jutting out into the river like the huge prow of some mighty ship.

The raft was turned about wildly at times, but stood the strain, and after a run of some fifteen miles, passed out of the rocky banks to where there were prairie shores again.

A landing was then made, and soon after the party on the right bank was seen approaching, and they were ferried over, while their horses swam.

Then the other party came in sight, and all had the same report to make, no trace had been found, no trail had been seen.

So Surgeon Powell was forced to give up his idea of the river having been the way the kidnappers had reached the fort and departed, and that he was on the right track in this belief the reader has already seen.

Then a circuit of the fort was made, clear around to the river again, and every trail to and from it was narrowly examined.

But it was useless, for the kidnappers had covered up their tracks as thoroughly as had the Assassins their retreat and trails to it.

So the party of the Surgeon Scout returned to the fort and made their report, and all now awaited with suspense and trust for the coming of Buffalo Bill and his men, for in them rested the last hope.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SUSPICION.

WHATEVER WAS in his heart, Colonel Seeley was calm and hopeful even after the return of Surgeon Powell, in whom he had placed such implicit trust that he would find some clew of his lost daughter.

Then all waited for the coming of Buffalo Bill, and the sentinels were kept constantly straining their eyes for the appearance of the chief of scouts' party.

At length the sentinel on the watch-tower reported horsemen in sight.

They came on slowly but were soon discovered to be Buffalo Bill and his men.

Men dared not cheer, they could only watch their coming and wait.

Colonel Seeley had gone to the tower and leveled his glass.

A moment he looked and then handing it to the paymaster who was with him, said:

"My eyes are blurred, Binney, you look for me."

"It is Cody, sir," said Paymaster Birney, after a glance through the glass.

"Oh, yes, it is Cody; but do you see—my child with him?"

Paymaster Birney often said afterward that no words he had ever uttered came so hard to say as his response then to Colonel Seeley:

"No, sir, I am sorry to say that I do not see any lady in the party."

The colonel uttered only a low moan and went to his quarters.

"Send Cody at once to me when he comes, Mr. Birney," he said.

So the scout and his men rode into the fort, the heads of their horses hanging low, their flanks gaunt, showing hard riding.

The scouts, too, looked jaded, and sorrowful.

"Well, Cody?" asked Surgeon Powell, as the chief of scouts dismounted.

The response proved his, unsuccessful:

"Has she been found?"

"No, we hoped you had news."

"Nothing."

"The colonel wishes to see you at once, Cody," said Paymaster Birney coming up to the group surrounding the scout, and Buffalo Bill at once accompanied him, while the gloom deepened upon all, for the last hope seemed to have left them.

Colonel Seeley met Buffalo Bill with a silent pressure of the hand.

He could not speak, but his manner, his eyes, questioned him more than words could have done.

The kind-hearted scout choked up at his suffering, and his voice had a tremor in it as he said:

"I wish to report my return, Colonel Seeley, and that though we have hardly rested since leaving the fort, and have followed every trail we saw, we could discover no trace of the vile devils who kidnapped your daughter," and the last words rolled from the scout's lips in savage earnestness that boded no good for the kidnappers at his hands had he come upon them with his scouts, all of whom were picked men for the special service they had gone upon.

The colonel winced under the report of the scout, for he had held strong hopes that Buffalo Bill had found some clew to solve the mystery; but he asked calmly:

"Have you come to any decision, Cody, in regard to my daughter's most mysterious disappearance?"

"I can only believe, sir, that she was captured by the writer of that threat to her, and he was aided by some one in the fort."

"But who?"

"Some one who knew your quarters and habits perfectly, sir."

"Some one who knew that the special sentinels were relieved from duty about your home."

"Yes, it must be so, and yet not a shadow of suspicion have I against any man."

The scout glanced at the paymaster, and said:

"If I take a different trail, sir, I hope you will consider it in confidence?"

"Certainly, as Paymaster Birney will."

The paymaster bowed in the affirmative, and Buffalo Bill said:

"You said, sir, that you had not the shadow of a suspicion against any man?"

"So I said, Cody, nor have I, and I fail to find any one else who has."

"What about a woman, sir?"

The question fell like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

"My God, Cody! what do you mean?"

"Miss Seeley was the most popular lady in the forts, sir, by all odds; she had many admirers, and no woman can win admiration without making dangerous foes, and my suspicion lies upon a woman."

The colonel became excited, and Paymaster Birney hardly less so; but the scout sat serenely looking at them after his bold charge.

At last the colonel said:

"Cody, you have had something to arouse your suspicions that you make this charge?"

"I have, sir."

"You suspect some woman in the fort of having aided in the kidnapping of my daughter?"

"Colonel Seeley, will you send for Surgeon Powell, sir, for what I say I would like him to hear."

The colonel seemed more than ever mystified. But he said:

"I will send for Surgeon Powell at once."

The orderly was therefore dispatched for the Surgeon Scout, and awaiting his coming not a word was spoken by the three in the room, the colonel walking to the window and looking out, the paymaster nervously fingering some papers on the table, and the chief of scouts cool and unmoved by his bold charge and what was yet before him when Frank Powell should put in an appearance before them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ONE SUSPECTED.

THE Surgeon Scout was easily found by the orderly, and entering the colonel's quarters saluted and took a seat, while his commandant, with an effort, said:

"Surgeon Powell, Cody has returned from his search unsuccessful, but he has a suspicion which he wishes to make known in confidence to those present."

"You will so consider it?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And more, what he desires to make known he expressed the wish that you should hear."

"What his motive is of course I do not know, but I am glad to call you in to the interview, well knowing how able you are to grasp the best points of a situation."

The surgeon bowed, and Colonel Seeley continued:

"I am also glad to have Paymaster Birney here as my friend."

"Now, Mr. Cody, we will hear what you have to say."

Buffalo Bill thus appealed to, said:

"I made known, Surgeon Powell, a suspicion I hold, that there was a traitor in the fort who aided the kidnapping of Miss Seeley."

"I believe that there must be—but who, Cody?"

"I suspect a woman."

The surgeon was a man of iron nerve, but he started at this bold charge, and asked:

"What is your motive for such suspicion?"

"Circumstantial evidence, I admit, yet to the point."

"Will you explain, Mr. Cody?" said the colonel anxiously.

"Surgeon Powell, do you recall one who came to your office some weeks ago, suffering intensely with toothache, and asked you to give her relief?"

"Make it more explicit than that, Cody, for I have a dozen aching teeth a day to soothe, or remove," said the surgeon, with a smile.

"Well, this one was young, very handsome, and when she left, for I was in the office, you were making up an ointment, and looked for your bottle of chloroform, but could not find it?"

"By—I beg pardon, Colonel Seeley! but Cody is on a trail that I believe we can track to the end."

"Go on, Cody," and the usual calm mien of the Surgeon Scout was now intensely ruffled, while anxiety rested upon the faces of the colonel and paymaster.

"Colonel Seeley, I gave you a bottle I found in your daughter's room the morning after her disappearance?"

"Yes."

"Can I see it?"

The colonel arose and got the bottle, Cody taking it from him in a way that prevented either the paymaster or surgeon from seeing it.

"You told me—" continued the scout.

"That you had the bottle of chloroform a short while before, and said, I remember:

"If it was a bottle of whisky, Bill, I would suspect you!"

"Yes, I recall the remark, and I meant it," said the surgeon, with a smile.

"Now I was there in your office for over an hour, looking over a map you gave me, and I can name every one who came in."

"One was Paymaster Birney, another the adjutant, the third was the woman in question, the fourth a soldier's wife, then a sergeant and a soldier."

"The chloroform was upon a certain shelf, and but one person went near it."

"That was the woman I suspect."

"She wore a shawl, chatted very lively for one with an aching tooth, and beautiful teeth she has, too, and I remarked that she thought more of the surgeon than her suffering, as she stayed so long."

"Now, describe the bottle you lost, please, Surgeon Powell?"

"A square, sixteen-ounce bottle, with a glass stopper."

"Is this the bottle?"

"It is."

"What has it had in it?"

"Chloroform without a doubt."

"Mr. Cody, who was it that you think got that bottle from Surgeon Powell's office?" sternly said the colonel.

"First, Colonel Seeley, if you will pardon me, please tell me what you know of your daughter's maid, Valerie?"

"No, no, do not suspect that child, Cody."

"Pardon me, Colonel Seeley, but it is important that I should know."

"She was the daughter of a sergeant in my company, who, when drinking one day, attacked me, and killed a soldier by accident."

"He was tried, and his very unsavory record went against him, for he was sentenced to be shot."

"Before his execution he sent for me and told me who he was, though I had known before, and in confidence here, let me say that he had been my rival for the hand of the lady I married, the mother of my daughter."

"He had gone utterly to the bad, and said that he had enlisted in the army to kill me, thinking I would not know him, for we had known each other slightly."

"Then he told me that he had a daughter whom he would leave destitute, and that she was then at school, and begged me to care for her."

"I did so, paying for her education, and gaining her a place as teacher, after which I lost sight of her for a couple of years, and then I received a letter from her asking me to get her a place as lady's maid to some officer's wife."

"Just at that time Alice finished school, and I sent her the letter and she at once engaged her, and for nearly two years has been her devoted companion and friend."

"Colonel Seeley, that is the woman I suspect."

"But why, Cody, and what motive could she have?"

"She is the one who stole the chloroform, sir."

"Yes, but her motive?"

"Revenge upon you."

"Ah! because I was the cause of her father's death?"

"Yes, sir, for did her father's effects not go to her?"

"Yes, and a sealed letter he left for her; but yet, Cody, she is as innocent as a child, and devoted to my daughter."

"It was clever acting, sir."

"And how could she be in league with outlaws?"

"You know nothing of her life before she came to Miss Seeley, sir, and you know she has been very fond of horseback rides alone, and I once took a fancy to follow her trail."

"And where did it lead?"

"To the grave of Sky Rocket, the Pony Rider, on the Fatal Trail, and there another trail met hers," was the scout's startling response.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON A WOMAN'S TRAIL.

WHEN Cody said what he did Colonel Seeley sprung to his feet, deeply moved.

He glanced at the faces of Surgeon Powell and Paymaster Birney, and saw that Buffalo Bill's suspicion had gained a hold in their minds.

After pacing up and down the room for a dozen strides, he stopped in front of the scout and said in a very low, but distinct tone which all heard:

"Cody, your charge is against one whom I would no sooner doubt of disloyalty to my daughter and myself, than I would you."

"Tell me when this was, that you followed Valerie?"

"I did not follow her, sir, but saw her trail, and wondering who would go so far from the fort alone, I examined the tracks."

"This examination told me that it was a horse that paced that left the trail, and I knew that Miss Seeley had a pacer, and her maid always rode the animal."

"I felt anxious for her, supposing she had missed her way, and so followed the trail."

"It led me for miles, and, as I said, to the grave of Sky Rocket the Pony Rider."

"I saw there tracks as though a horse had been in waiting some time at the spot."

"There is a small clump of trees there, sir, and in these both horses had been standing."

"I then noticed that the other trail came from the Bad Lands, and I followed it."

"It led me astray just as all other trails of the Ambushers had."

"Then I followed the trail of the pacing horse and noted that he came by another way to the fort than the one taken."

"It was night when I arrived at the fort and I asked the sentinel who had come in."

"His reply was that:

"Miss Seeley's smart maid had been out trying to get scalped, and she had had a fight, too."

"I did not hear more of it, and it was several days before I got a chance to speak to Valerie, and then I said:

"You go a long way from the fort to meet your lover."

"I supposed then that it was some one from the fort, and that there was a secret love-affair between them, and thus I accounted for her numerous other rides alone."

"And her reply, Cody?"

"Her reply, sir, was to turn very pale, and she left me without another word."

"I still believed that she had met a lover from the fort, and yet it all came back to me when Miss Seeley disappeared, as well as the fact that Valerie took a ride alone the very day before your daughter was kidnapped, Colonel

Seeley, but her trail was to a point on the river three miles below the fort."

"You are sure?"

"I found the trail, sir, and it was the pacer's. Then I heard that Valerie had ridden him away, and where she halted there were other horse-tracks."

"This, too, I found on the ground," and the scout handed over a small fine handkerchief.

In the corner was embroidered two VV's close together, so as to also look like the letter W.

"Her name is Valerie Wambold, is it not, sir?"

"Yes, V. W., and this is her handkerchief beyond all doubt."

"Then, sir, you told me that a large part of your daughter's wardrobe was taken, as also Valerie's?"

"Yes, yes."

"You thought it strange, sir, that it had been so well selected in the haste of the kidnapping?"

"I did."

"Well, sir, a man would never have thought of this, and particularly not of getting the maid's clothes; but the fact that a liberal supply of clothing was taken should cheer you with the thought that it was not to carry out the threat of death Miss Seeley was taken, but rather perhaps to secure a ransom, or bring you to terms of some kind."

"Cody, you are a wonder, a regular detective, and your words give me great hope."

"Now, sir, please see if you can remember if Valerie had any valuables?"

"She did, a handsome watch and chain, some jewelry and quite a little sum of money saved up, which she always kept among her things."

"Did you notice if any of Miss Seeley's valuables were missing, sir?"

"Not a thing, except the rings she wore."

"This caused me to feel that robbery and ransom had not been the reason for her being taken away, but to carry out the threat made by the Ambushers."

"Will you now see, sir, if any of Valerie's valuables were taken?"

The colonel uttered an exclamation and hastened from the room.

He was gone but a short while, and said as he re-entered the room:

"Everything she had of value is gone, Cody."

"And the warning Miss Seeley received was pinned upon her pillow, when she was asleep, was it not, sir?"

"It was."

"One question more, please, Colonel Seeley?"

"All you wish to ask, Cody, I will gladly answer, for something tells me that you are weaving a chain of circumstantial evidence about that girl which certainly is most damning."

"What do you think, Surgeon Powell?"

"I have been convinced, sir, ever since I saw that chloroform-bottle, that Cody was on the right trail."

"And you, Paymaster Birney?"

"The finding of the handkerchief, sir, and her trail meeting another, settled it with me, Colonel Seeley."

"Now, Cody, your question?"

"Did Valerie sketch?"

"By Heaven! she did!"

"Have you the warning sent your daughter?" The colonel fairly sprung toward his desk and got it."

"Now, sir, can you find any work that Valerie did, any paper she used in sketching?"

The colonel again hastily left the room, and soon returned with a small portfolio.

It was full of cleverly-executed sketches, and when the paper was compared with that upon which the warning had been sketched and written, Colonel Seeley said emphatically:

"It is the same."

Surgeon Powell looked at it with the eye of a critic and said:

"It is her work, sir."

"There is no doubt of it in my mind, Colonel Seeley," remarked Paymaster Birney.

"Cody," and the colonel spoke with deep emotion, "you have solved the mystery, and I now believe that my daughter's life is safe at least, for she could not allow her to be put to death."

"But what is to be done?"

"Keep the secret between us four now here, sir, allowing no one to suspect that we have a suspicion of who the traitor is, and we will get a clew to work on in due time."

"God bless you, Cody," and the old soldier wrung the scout's hand with a force that made him wince.

CHAPTER XXX.

VELVET BILL'S VOW.

AS the two officers and Buffalo Bill were about to leave the quarters of Colonel Seeley, the latter said:

"By the way, this is Pony Rider's day, and I have heard no call that Velvet Bill is in sight."

"It is past his time, sir," said Surgeon Powell glancing at his watch.

"Yes, nearly an hour past," Paymaster Birney remarked.

"I sincerely hope no harm has befallen him,

for outside of his death, we will be placed in a most unfortunate situation.

"If I only had the men I would completely surround the Bad Lands—where all these murders have been committed, and starve those devils out of the place from which we cannot drive them, and where we can never track them; but report to me if news comes of the Pony Rider, Cody."

The three departed, with deepest sympathy in their breasts for the gallant soldier, and as they reached the parade ground they saw that all in the fort seemed to be on the lookout for the coming of the Pony Rider.

They knew his time, and all had gathered about in groups awaiting his coming, or proof that he, too, had fallen a victim to the unknown Ambushers.

There was one group of officers, some twenty in number, standing near the watch-tower.

Another group was of subalterns, and there the soldiers stood about in knots of a dozen and twenty.

The scouts, too, were on the watch, and the people of the Post, wives and children of the soldiers and hangers-on in general.

In front of the major's quarters most of the ladies of the fort had congregated, and over all seemed to rest a hush, as though they feared they were awaiting the coming of a man then dead.

Two hours passed and then came from the sentinel in the watch-tower the cry that there was a horseman in sight.

"Was it the Gambler Pony Rider?" was the question that all asked.

Soon the horseman came into view from the fort, and a dozen voices cried out:

"It is Velvet Bill!"

Then up to heaven went a cheer so wild that it reached the ears of the distant Rider.

On, on he came like an arrow, his horse at full speed and covered with foam, and the magnificent Rider upright in his saddle, his eyes up on the fort.

The stockade gates were thrown open, discipline for once was forgotten, and officers, soldiers and women and children crowded toward his halting-place.

In he swept, and was met by a perfect roar of voices, echoing like thunder, the waving of hats, caps and handkerchiefs.

He seemed surprised, but ever courtly, raised his hat and bent low in his saddle.

Then his horse was reined to a sudden halt, he leaped to the ground, seized the pouches, and with uncovered head passed through the almost wild crowd toward Colonel Seeley's quarters.

So glad were they to see him, so great had been their surprise, that all restraint was broken through with, and the Gambler Pony Rider received a welcome fit for the commander of a victorious army.

His horse showed a hard ride, there was no wound upon him, and Velvet Bill seemed unharmed, so all wondered at his being two hours behind time.

And into the quarters of Colonel Seeley strode the Pony Rider, tossing the mail-pouches to the postman, and carrying the official package to the hands of the commandant.

"Thank Heaven you have returned in safety, Velvet Bill, and you hear how glad all are to see you alive, for your delay caused us to feel that you too had fallen."

"I halted on the way, sir, to examine some trails, for I saw no enemy, and met with no trouble on my ride," was the response of the gambler.

"Have you heard any news from the fort since you left?"

"None, sir."

"Then you do not know what happened the night after your departure?"

"No, sir; nothing has gone wrong, I hope?"

"My child has been kidnapped, Velvet Bill."

The voice trembled, the lips quivered, and the bright eyes of the soldier were blurred with tears.

Velvet Bill started, his face flushed and paled by turns, and he repeated the words:

"Has been kidnapped?"

"Yes, the Ambushers kept a part of their threat at least."

"The Ambushers?"

"Yes, Velvet Bill, for the night after you left it rained here, and some one entered my quarters, chloroformed me, and my daughter too, I suppose, for she was carried away, she and her maid, Valerie."

"Who did it no one knows, nor whither she was taken, for not a trace can be found as a clue; but she is gone, Velvet Bill."

"And I solemnly vow to you, Colonel Seeley, that I will restore you to her, or if she has been harmed will visit upon the one who has done this vile wrong a vengeance that will make him curse the day he was born."

"I vow it, Colonel Seeley, in the sight of High Heaven!"

The voice, look, the blazing eyes of Velvet Bill were appalling, and Colonel Seeley said afterward that never before had he seen the human face look as did the gambler's when he uttered his vow.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RED BUTTERFLY AT HOME.

I WILL now return once more to the East, leaving for awhile the far frontier and its dangers to present to the reader a peaceful home upon the shore of beautiful Lake George.

Upon the broad piazza of an old stone house, surrounded by many acres of farm-land, sat one who is known as Go-won-go Mohawk.

She is neatly dressed in a dark-blue suit, that fits her elegant form to perfection, but the Indian in her nature has shown itself in the cap which she wears.

It is a jaunty affair of the finest buckskin, embroidered with beads, and in front is a red butterfly.

She is reading a novel, and, tiring of it, leaves the piazza and walks out upon the lawn to where is a summer-house with a target beyond it.

In this summer-house, which can be locked up, are numbers of rifles, revolvers and other weapons.

The target is a movable one, mounted upon tiny rails, and can be run back and forth to any distance from a couple of hundred yards to ten feet.

Then, too, it is so arranged that by putting the foot upon a pedal in the summer house, a wooden prop of a man would come into position.

Another touch upon the pedal and he would dart aside.

Other dummies, of wolves and a rabbit could be made to spring into view and dart away, while the target could also be arranged for the very best of marksmanship, such as cutting a hair in twain from which a bullet hangs, shooting at a small marble in motion, and at a bull's-eye the size of a three-cent piece.

If tiring of her novel, Go-won-go found pleasure in her target-practice, for she used rifle after rifle, then revolver, next a dueling-pistol, and last a derringer, and her aim with all was perfect.

Then she shot awhile with a bow and arrow, showing the same deadly aim as with firearms.

But as the sound of a horn came to her ears, she dropped all and ran to the gate opening upon the highway.

A two-wheel wagon was coming along the road, and in it was a man who held in his hand three letters.

It was the postman who drove along the lake-shore delivering the mails to the farms on his way from the village some miles distant.

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Go-won-go, and she returned to her seat upon the piazza.

"One from my father, so I will read that first," and she broke it open.

It was only a few lines from Daniel Darwin, telling her he would be detained yet a week in Philadelphia, whither he had gone on business.

Another letter was from Lucita Dillingham, asking her to come and spend a few weeks with her.

The third was postmarked at Dismal City, and was written in a decidedly characteristic hand.

"Who can it be from?" she asked herself, and then breaking the seal she read:

"DISMAL CITY, July 12, 18—."

"MY DEAR GO-WON-GO:—"

"Does a letter from me surprise you?"

"I hope not unpleasantly, however, though I write upon a very sad subject."

"Do you remember a promise you made me when I asked you if you would come West again if the Unknown Assassins ever again appeared upon the Fatal Trail?"

"Let me remind you of it, if you have forgotten it, for I remember well your words:

"You answered:

"If they capture you, Velvet Bill, I will come West to rescue you."

"If they kill you, I will come to avenge you."

"Now such were your words, and though I have neither been captured or killed, I wish your aid, for the beautiful daughter of Colonel Seeley has been kidnapped from the fort, and is now in the power of the Ambushers of the Fatal Trail."

"She was your friend, for you told me so, and also said she was very dear to you."

"Since you left, Pony Express Ben and Pony Bob have both been waylaid on the Fatal Trail."

"Pony Ben was killed, and Pony Bob was dangerously wounded, but Surgeon Powell says that he will recover."

"I then, as you had promised Colonel Seeley, began to ride, and returning from my first run, I found that Miss Seeley had been kidnapped."

"So I ask you to come, and mail this letter in Dismal City."

"I need you, and together we can save that poor girl, or avenge her."

"I have vowed to do one or the other."

"Will you come?"

"Feeling that you will, I will have your horses ready for you to again ride Pony Express, while I will go back to my gambling, as in that capacity I will be able the better to play detective, as you will as Pony Rider."

"Arrive here in time to catch me at Dismal City."

"Feeling assured that you will come, I remain,

"Asever, your pard of the plains,

"Velvet Bill."

Such was the letter that Go-won-go read, and she had hardly caught sight of the name at the end, when she sprang to her feet and went out to the summer-house where she kept her weapons,

and which Daniel Darwin was wont to call her "armory."

In a few minutes she had made a selection of certain weapons and carried them into the house, to her room.

She had, without doubt, decided upon some plan of action the moment she had read the letter of Velvet Bill.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MINER RECEIVES A LETTER.

DANIEL DARWIN was a man to attract attention anywhere.

He was a man six feet in height, upright as an Indian, had the carriage of a soldier and a face that was full of manliness.

He was a handsome man, too, with his fine dark eyes, classical features and expression that was strangely fascinating.

This was the man who, as a country boy was dwelling upon the farm left him by his parents, with little knowledge of the great world beyond.

He had been sent off to boarding-school where he proved himself a good scholar and was popular with his comrades.

Then he came back to the farm to close his parent's eyes when they passed away, and settle down as a farmer.

But it is known what changed his life's current, what awoke him to ambition, after he had saved from drowning at the risk of his own life, Frank Courtney and his sister.

He had loved Lucita with all his soul, and when in a manly way he had gone to her home and asked for her, he had been told by her father to "match her fortune."

He had not despaired, but had left the old home and gone to the mines, where, after years of danger and toil he had won a fortune from the earth.

The result is known, and how for a long time, from a wound received he had lost his reason.

His rescue by Go-won-go, his faithful adopted daughter, brought him back to life, his reason was restored, and a man with a skeleton love in his heart he had been glad to find a hiding-place on the old farm where he had passed his boyhood, and happy was he that the beautiful Indian girl was willing to make her home there, too.

He got her horses, firearms, boats, dogs, all to make her enjoy the life she loved, while indoors was a fine library, a piano and other instruments.

The mine he had placed in other hands to work was paying well, but the little home there invited him, and there he expected to spend his days.

An investment in Philadelphia offering where he could safely place his money, he had gone there, and upon his return had missed the welcome that Go-won-go ever gave him.

"Where is Go-won-go, Ellen?" he asked of the woman who had long been a fixture in his house.

"She left a week ago, to make a visit, she said."

"Indeed?"

And he looked surprised, and then Ellen said:

"She got a lot of letters one day, and at once she packed up, and David drove her to the station; but maybe her letter will tell you all, for she placed one on your desk."

So to his desk went Daniel Darwin, and there was the letter, addressed to him and sealed.

Hastily throwing himself into a chair he broke the seal and read:

"MY DEAR FATHER:—"

"I had believed that I was to pass my years here in peace and contentment, living alone, after I had told you that which would bring joy into your life, which has known so much of sorrow."

"But I received to day three letters."

"One was from you, telling me not to expect you for a week yet."

"Another was from Mrs. Dillingham, inviting me to make her a visit, and the third was the one which calls me away."

"The last was from Velvet Bill, the gambler of Jumping Off City."

"You know him, and what service he rendered you, and how much he aided me."

"Since my leaving, it seems that two Riders have been ambushed on the Fatal Trail, and true to his promise to me, if such happened, Velvet Bill volunteered to ride the Pony Express from Fort Venture to Dismal City, for he had told me that no other murder would occur there, that the Ambushers would depart, and I had good reason to feel that he knew."

"But the worst is yet to tell, for the Assassins of the Trail threatened once to make Miss Seeley the victim of their revenge if either Velvet Bill or myself rode the trail."

"They have carried out their threat by kidnapping Miss Seeley, as you will see by the within letter, as it explains the situation better than I can tell it you."

"It is my good friend that is in their cruel power, it is the daughter of the noble commandant who was ever so kind to me, and so I obey the call of Velvet Bill and go to again ride Pony Express."

"Only a few there know me as I am, and you know that the wild life suits me well, and I am fully capable of taking care of myself whether I dress as man or woman."

"But before I go I must tell you a secret which I have long kept from you."

"You remember that I once made a visit to a friend?"

"Well, it was Mrs. Lucita Dillingham, the one you always believed false to you."

"But the truth I will now tell and more, I will tell you what you have never known, that she is a widow, her husband having been wounded on Sunset Sam's coach, and died at Surgeon Powell's cabin at Miner's Roost."

"She arrived there to see him die, and he left her his fortune, which her father and her brother forced her to marry him to gain."

"She knew lot of your restoration to reason, and sending for me, told me of her sad story, and confessed that she had loved you alone."

"Need I say more?"

"I send her address, so go and see her, only do not let her know I betrayed her secret."

"There is happiness in store yet for you both."

"As for myself—well, wait and see, my father, for now I can say nothing more than I act without your consent, but it is my duty as I see it."

"I will write from the West."

"Farewell. Your daughter, Go-won-go."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"TERROR TOM."

VELVET BILL continued to ride the Pony Express, going and coming without meeting the fate all expected would be visited upon him.

The people at the fort had begun to look upon him as possessing a charmed life, as Go-won-go, the Indian Rider, had.

He reported that he had never seen the Ambushers, though he had never sought to avoid them in his rides.

Now and then he would come in late, often being several hours behind time, but he made no excuse for the delay unless questioned, and then always gave the same answer:

"I was making observations."

Sometimes when at the fort, instead of seeking rest, he was wont to engage in a game of cards with some of the officers, and it was almost always their loss and his gain.

Then, too, at Dismal City, where he passed the greater part of his time off duty, he would play with the miners, and his phenomenal luck always clung to him.

It was said, too, that he would leave Dismal City often, for his stay there was four days, and remain away half the time, going no one knew where, though he was now seen at Miner's Roost, and again at Jumping Off City.

So it was that Velvet Bill began to be looked upon as a more mysterious man than ever.

In his mail one day, brought by Velvet Bill, Colonel Seeley received a letter which worried him greatly.

It was dated at Dismal City, and was as follows:

"DEAR KERNAL:—

"I hates ter break up yer friendship for one you trusts, but I happens ter know that Velvet Bill are playin' you fer a tenderfoot, fer he knows better than any one else whar yer darter is."

"He were ther one as had her tuk, and he has her in hidin', hopin' ter make gold out o' ther rakkit some day."

"I am a-comin' ter see yer in person and tell yer all I knows, so don't say nuthin' to nobody of what I tel's yer, only keep yer soger eye on Velvet Bill, and see ef he hain't a-playin' yer fer his own ends."

"Make no mistake ontill yer see"

"Yours truly,

"TERROR TOM."

Not a clew had been found as to where Alice had been taken, though every scout in the fort was secretly doing detective work upon the mysterious affair, and a number of the officers and soldiers too.

The colonel looked pale and haggard; but he kept his grief to himself, neglected not a single duty, and all went on as before the kidnapping of Alice and her maid.

But this letter fairly alarmed Colonel Seeley. Who Terror Tom was he did not know, and the charge he made he could not believe.

He had come to have a real affection for Velvet Bill, and was looking to him as the one for the first news of his daughter.

He read the letter over carefully again, and then remembering that Surgeon Powell, who had passed a long while at the mining-camps in his character of Parson Prim, must know who Terror Tom was, he sent for him.

"Surgeon Powell, did you ever hear of a man in Dismal City who was known as Terror Tom?"

"I do not recall any one of that name there, sir."

"Or in either Jumping Off City or Miner's Roost?"

"Now I think of it, sir, there were three men in Jumping Off City who were known as the Three Terrors, and they answered to the names of Tom, Dick and Harry, and I believe were called separately with the prefix of Terror before their names; but Velvet Bill could tell you, sir, for he drove those three worthies out of the mines for cheating a young miner at cards."

"Ah, yes, I heard something of that, and also that they had gone to Dismal City."

"I thank you, Doctor Powell."

"How is Pony Bob getting along now?"

"Steadily improving, sir."

"Out of all danger, I hope?"

"His is an ugly wound, sir, but unless some new phase presents itself, I believe we can hope for his perfect recovery in a couple of months."

"I sincerely hope so; but it will belong before he can ride Pony Express again, if he ever does."

"He says he is anxious to get well and try the Pony Trail again, sir."

"Yes, he is full of grit."

"My remembrances to him, please."

The surgeon withdrew and Colonel Seeley said to himself:

"Yes, his motive is revenge upon Velvet Bill, for his driving him and his comrades out of Jumping Off City."

"If he comes here he must bring very strong proof, or I'll deal with him in a way he will not fancy."

"Ah! my poor child, where are you now, and what is your fate?" and the colonel gritted his teeth to keep down the emotion that welled up from his heart.

Just at nightfall Velvet Bill came in for his orders, ready to start upon his return.

The colonel took position so that he could get the light full upon the face of the gambler and asked suddenly:

"Velvet Bill, who is Terror Tom?"

"Terror Tom must be the king devil of three men known as the Three Terrors, sir, now at Dismal City."

"You know them?"

"Yes, sir, I have met them," was the cool reply.

"They will bear watching, eh?"

"I think they richly deserve hanging, sir, and some day they may cause me to put the noose about their necks, if they do not force me to shoot them first."

"I heard they were bad men and thought you would know."

The gambler saluted, took his mail and departed, while Colonel Seeley muttered:

"Now for the visit of Mr. Terror Tom."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UGLY ACCUSATION.

It was the next day that a horseman arrived at Fort Venture and asked to see Colonel Seeley.

He would not state what he wanted, only told the orderly to say that a man known as Terror Tom wished to see him, adding:

"Oh, he'll see me, Pard Soger, fer I hain't no slouch."

"He knows me intermate, does ther colonel."

The colonel surprised the orderly by saying, at once:

"Terror Tom?"

"Yes; send him here immediately."

"Didn't I tell yer so, soger?"

"Oh, he knows me."

And, with this, Terror Tom was admitted into the presence of the commandant of Fort Venture.

Colonel Seeley saw before him a large man dressed in miner's costume, wearing high top-boots and spurs, and with a broad-brimmed sombrero upon his head.

He had a belt-of-arms, and looked the man to use them in a bad cause rather than a good one.

His face was bearded, his eyes small, cunning and bright, and his hair was worn long, falling half-down his broad back.

"A villain from heart to brain," was the colonel's mental sizing-up of Terror Tom.

The latter saw before him a man of fifty, with a face now stern and haggard, and eyes that seemed to read his very soul.

If he had intended any bluster, something in the calm dignity and stern face of the man before him cowed him.

"So you are Terror Tom, are you?"

"I be so named."

"You wrote me a letter, I believe?"

"I am ther man, sir."

"Did you come alone?"

"I did, Pard Colonel."

"Where are your two comrades, Terror Dick and Terror Harry? for the trio is not complete, I see."

The colonel saw the man start, but he said, doggedly:

"They remained behind, colonel, fer it were me made the leetle discovery, and they hain't in this deal."

"Well, what discovery have you made?"

"What I writ you about."

"Tell me again."

"I says ther Velvet Bill are ther man as tuk your darter away."

"This is a very bold charge against a man in Government service, as he now is, and one whom we all trust implicitly."

"That's jist it, colonel, yer all trusts him, and he plays a game on yer that are double."

"You have your proofs, I suppose?"

"I has my eyes."

"Well, what have you seen?"

"I has seen Velvet Bill a-ridin' with your darter at night."

"He hev ter move her round, I s'poses, ter keep Buf'ler Bill and his gang from trailing her, but I seen him with her."

"When?"

"One week and more ago, fu'st."

"And again?"

"I has."

"When?"

"Last night, arter he left here."

"He was with my daughter?"

"He were."

"Where?"

"Nigh ther grave o' ther Pony Rider Sky Rocket."

"Ah! were they alone?"

"They was not adzactly alone, for thar was some six or seven Injuns not far off, and a-keepin' close enough ter make it lively fer me ef I hed tried ter capter her."

"Where were you?"

"A-lying down behind a rock, and my horse, too."

"I were a-waitin' fer him ter come along, and when he come he hed comp'ny."

"You saw this?"

"I did, colonel."

"It was moonlight?"

"Bright as day."

"How far off were you?"

"About sixty feet."

"Did you hear them talking?"

"I c'd not hear what they was sayin'."

"My daughter was a prisoner?"

"Now thet I doesn't know, fer she didn't seem so uncommon sad, as I heard her laff."

Colonel Seeley turned deadly pale, but made no immediate reply, and Terror Tom took advantage of this to continue:

"Now it did look ter me as though she hed come along with ther Injuns and met him on ther trail; but I laid mighty low, I kin jist tell yer."

"And you say you have seen him with her before last night?"

"I hev."

"When?"

"Some ten days ago."

"Where?"

"Waal, it were in the Fatal Trail, but nearer ter Jumping Off City than they was last night."

"Where were you?"

"I were a-layin' on ther trail a-waitin' fer Velvet Bill."

"What for?"

"This are in confidence, colonel?"

"Yes."

"Ter kill him."

"Ah! you intended to kill him?"

"That were my leetle business with him."

"I see; so you are one of the Assassins of the Trail, are you?"

"No, I isn't, but Velvet Bill are, and thet hain't all."

"What else?"

"He is ther chief."

"Your word is all you have to prove this?"

"I knows what I says."

"I don't like Velvet Bill, and I intended ter git even and kill him fer what he did ter me and my pards."

"So I tuk ther trail fer his scalp; but when I seen him ther fu'st time he were with your darter, and hed half a dozen Injuns a-follerin'."

"Thet were in broad daylight."

"So I goes back to Dismal City and writes you thet letter, t'inkin' ef yer hanged Velvet Bill I would git my revenge."

"Then I comes here and I sees what I tells yer ag'in."

"Thet's Gospil truth, colonel."

"If you have told the truth it will be well for you, man; but if not, it will be a sad day for you when you come to me with a lie on your lips."

"Until I know, you must be my guest."

"Now, thet are real kind and genteel, colonel."

"Orderly!"

"Yes, sir."

"My compliments to the officer of the day and request him to send a sergeant and file of men here to take this man to the guard-house for safe-keeping."

"Waal, I'll be darned," groaned Terror Tom with a reproachful look at the colonel who said:

"You shall be well cared for; but if you speak a word of what you have told me I shall know it and I will have you hanged without mercy."

And so Terror Tom was led away and placed under guard.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PROOF.

THOUGH Colonel Seeley kept up such a brave front before the accuser of Velvet Bill, he nearly broke down as soon as the soldiers led the man from his presence.

He was about crushed, and yet he could not believe what he heard, though there was a semblance of truth in what he had said.

He had so frankly admitted that he had gone on the track of Velvet Bill to kill him, but had preferred to see him hanged, if it could be done, to shooting him.

He had said that he saw the gambler and Alice together, first in broad daylight, and again by moonlight, each time with a guard of Indians.

He had heard Alice laugh, he said, and implied that she was a willing prisoner.

What to do under the circumstances he did not know.

He could not but recall the fact that Velvet Bill escaped the Secret Assassins in a wonderful way, and that Alice had been spirited away by one who knew the fort well.

He had vowed to rescue her, and he had only volunteered as Pony Rider, when the threat of the Assassins was shown to him making her their intended victim.

Altogether it was a most complicated affair, and one that was agonizing to the colonel.

The thought would force itself upon him how often Alice had spoken of Velvet Bill, how she had admired him, and how anxious she had seemed about his riding the Pony Express.

At last, utterly at a loss to extricate himself from his misfortunes, the colonel sent his orderly for Surgeon Powell.

He could trust him wholly he well knew, and there was that about the surgeon which invited perfect confidence.

When Surgeon Powell reported himself, the colonel led the way to his own private room.

"Sit down, my dear Powell, for I wish to talk to you as I would to—my own self."

"I wish your advice; I wish to see how you look at what I have just heard."

Surgeon Powell saw that his commander was deeply moved, and said in his sympathetic way:

"Command me, Colonel Seeley, and trust me wholly if you deem that I can aid you."

"You can, for you have both heart and brain."

"I asked you about Terror Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Read this letter."

He handed over the letter sent from Dismal City.

Surgeon Powell read it carefully through and said:

"Revenge against Velvet Bill prompted that letter, sir."

"So I at first thought."

"But you do not now, sir?"

"No."

"May I ask what has occurred to change your opinion?"

"Yes, I will tell you the truth in full, if you will hear me."

"Gladly, sir."

"The man is here."

"Terror Tom?"

"Yes."

"Here in the fort?"

"He is in the guard-house, where I sent him not an hour ago."

"It is the very place for him, sir."

"He came to me and told his story."

"All a lie, sir, if you will pardon me."

"He asserts that he saw Velvet Bill and my daughter together."

"Thank Heaven! for he will bring her to the fort soon."

"No, no, you must know all," and Colonel Seeley told everything which Terror Tom had made known to him.

Frank Powell listened with the deepest attention.

He knew that the eyes of the colonel were trying to read his thoughts, so his face revealed no emotion.

At last he said:

"Colonel Seeley, I do not believe a word of this story."

"Thank Heaven for that."

"The man has some game to play, sir, and he is playing it boldly."

"He is in the guard-house you say, so when Velvet Bill comes back you can confront him with his accuser and see the result."

"In the mean while, sir, I will go out and camp alone on the Fatal Trail to see if I can make any discoveries."

"I will wait at the further end, near Jumping Off City, until Velvet Bill passes, and then follow him to the fort, just keeping him in sight."

"I wish that you would do so, Powell; but there is Lieutenant Ames, and he has been with Jack Crawford alone on the Fatal Trail."

"I will hear his report."

The young officer was called in, and both the colonel and Frank Powell observed how pale and haggard his face was as he said:

"I have a sad report to make, sir, when I can see you alone."

"Speak out now, sir."

"I lay in hiding on the trail last night, Colonel Seeley, and I saw Velvet Bill pass within fifty feet of me, but not alone, sir."

"Who was with him, sir?" sternly demanded Colonel Seeley.

"I regret to give you pain, sir, but, it was your daughter!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LIEUTENANT'S STORY.

WHEN Colonel Seeley heard the words of Lieutenant Andrew Ames, he stood like a man who had received his death-blow.

His face became the hue of death, the veins distended, his lips were set and his eyes fairly glared at the young officer.

But only for a moment did he thus appear to suffer, for he was a man of wonderful self-control, and he rallied quickly.

Lieutenant Ames also seemed to feel most deeply what he had seen and reported.

The colonel knew him as a warm admirer of his daughter, one whom Alice regarded most highly, as he did himself.

In fact, Colonel Seeley had begun to feel that Alice really intended to accept the gallant officer some day, though she showed no particular partiality in public for any one.

Now this was the man who came to him and said that he had seen his daughter riding with Velvet Bill, when the Pony Rider was supposed to be flying along on his perilous mission of carrying the mail and Express.

Surgeon Powell sat silent also, impressed more than he cared to admit by what he had heard.

The lieutenant's report verified that of the man then in the guard-house, Terror Tom.

The situation was a painful one for all three, and the colonel was the first to break the silence.

He spoke in a calm way, but the effort to do so was a telling one:

"Lieutenant Ames, will you explain to me minutely all that you have to report, please?"

"I went, sir, with Jack Crawford, on what I hoped would be a successful search for some news of Miss Seeley, and we decided to hover about the Fatal Trail, taking regular turns in duty."

"We found a place where one of us could encamp with the horses in security, while it commanded a view of the spot where we intended to remain in hiding, one at a time."

"Jack Crawford went on duty first, sir, for the day, and made no discovery, and just at night I took up the watch."

"My place was a secure one, among the rocks and within a few yards of the Fatal Trail, not very far from Sky Rocket's grave."

"I could command a fine view up and down the trail, and, being aloft, could easily hide should an enemy appear."

"The time passed on until nearly the hour for the Pony Rider to come along, and soon I saw forms in the distance."

"There were two, and I supposed the Pony Rider had some company from the fort."

"But soon I saw that they were riding in a walk, and not long after others came in sight perhaps a hundred yards behind the two in advance."

"Those in the rear I noted were some half-dozen in number and shaping their pace to suit the two ahead."

"As they drew nearer I recognized Velvet Bill as one, for the moon shone full upon him, and the other I saw was a woman."

"A glance at the others showed that there were eight of them, and they were Indians."

"Velvet Bill was talking in a light way, and I heard the lady respond and then break forth in a laugh, but what was said I could not hear."

"Then you do not know that it was my daughter, sir?"

"I did hear her voice, sir, and it was that of Miss Seeley, while the form and face were hers as well as I could see."

"The sombrero she wore when riding, with its crossed sabers and gold cord, was upon her head, and the dark-blue riding-habit trimmed with brass buttons, while the waist was encircled by the red sash Miss Seeley wore."

"Were these things taken with her, Colonel Seeley?"

"Yes; I noticed that even her riding-whip was gone," was the hoarse rejoinder.

"She, too, carried a riding-whip, sir, and playfully shook it at Velvet Bill for some remark he made."

"You know my daughter well, Lieutenant Ames?"

"I do, sir."

"You are convinced that the one you saw was she?"

"I am, sir, or it was her counterpart."

"And you know Velvet Bill?"

"Well, sir."

"And the man you saw was he?"

"Either Velvet Bill, sir, or his living counterpart."

"I was at first about to step out, feeling assured that Velvet Bill had found Miss Seeley; but the Indians in the rear deterred me, fortunately."

"Why fortunately?"

"I will explain, sir."

"I concluded to wait until they had passed, for I did not know but that after all Velvet Bill and Miss Seeley might be prisoners, and more red-skins were following."

"But as the two in advance came near me, I heard the man say:

"This trail shall make my fortune before I am done with it; but come, we must hasten on our way."

"With that they started into a gallop, the Indians following at the same pace, and one against nine, I dared not show myself."

"I at once went for Jack Crawford, and he followed the trail in the moonlight, as a hound might have done."

"We rode rapidly, and, coming to a rise, drew rein just in time, for there was the group on the prairie."

"They did not see us, fortunately, and just then Velvet Bill went on alone, and the lady, with the Indians following her, branched off suddenly to the right and went away at a brisk run."

"We followed until their trail struck the barren lands, and there we lost it, so we returned to the fort."

Such was the lieutenant's story, and it gave Colonel Seeley much food for reflection.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SURGEON SCOUT ON THE TRAIL.

LIEUTENANT ANDREW AMES retired to his quarters with a very sad heart.

He would not doubt Alice Seeley, and yet he could not doubt his own eyesight.

The colonel had motioned to Frank Powell to still remain with him.

When the lieutenant had gone, he was the first to break the silence.

"What do you think now, Powell?"

"The man Terror Tom must have seen what he reported to you, sir."

"Beyond all doubt, so I will have to let him go."

"I would say hold on to him, sir, until you have seen Velvet Bill."

"Will he return?"

"Yes, sir, for he does not know that he is suspected."

"In fact, Colonel Seeley, I can neither suspect Velvet Bill or Miss Seeley of more than playing a part for good to come of it in the end."

"You are very generous, Powell."

"Well, sir, that gambler is a very remarkable man, and I regard him as true as steel."

"Your daughter, too, may have been seen with him, but after all it may be some plot for good after all."

"Wait and see Velvet Bill, sir."

"I can only wait."

"But should he refuse to explain?"

"Then, sir, I would put him under arrest, and the truth must be gotten at in some other way than through him."

"Now, sir, shall I take the trail to see if I can make any discoveries?"

"Yes, if you will, and you can have any men you wish."

"I prefer to go alone, sir."

"Do as you deem best, Powell, and I will look to you to bring me some news to lighten this oppression upon heart and brain, for you must know how I suffer."

"I do, sir, and feel for you deeply; but I do not give up hope that all will yet come well. I neither doubt the loyalty of Miss Seeley or of Velvet Bill; but I would give a good deal if Red Butterfly was only here, for he had such a cool head and clever way of getting at bottom facts."

"I will send a telegram urgent enough to bring him when the Pony Rider leaves on his next ride."

"It can go by stage to Council Bluffs, and be wired from there."

"Will he come, sir?"

"Do you send the telegram, Powell, and make its wording such as to bring him."

"I believe if you told him my daughter was a captive of the outlaws of the Fatal Trail he will come."

"I will send the telegram, sir, and urge his coming all in my power."

"But now I will get ready for the trail, and you need not expect my return, sir, unless I make valuable discoveries, before Velvet Bill arrives again."

"I have perfect confidence in you, Powell, and may good fortune attend you."

With a grasp of the hand the two parted, and after another visit to his patient, Pony Bob, and a few directions regarding his treatment, Frank Powell went to his quarters and prepared for his secret expedition.

His preparations were most thorough, for he had provisions put up for him by his servants, blankets and oilskins for sleeping out, and mounted his best horse.

He also took with him his repeating-rifle and an extra revolver, which he put in his saddleholster.

Thus equipped for red work, if need be, he rode away from the fort.

His plan was not to follow the Fatal Trail, but to make his course a zig-zag one, crossing the trail every few hours, and thus avoiding an ambush, while he could observe all tracks upon it, for he meant to travel only by day.

The evening of the second day he rode into Jumping Off City without making any discovery of note.

Trails he had seen, and fresh ones, but they all became lost in the barren lands, as all others had been.

He rode straight to the tavern and put up.

Then he went in search of Comanche, the Indian who acted as Velvet Bill's man of all work.

But, though the doctor spoke Comanche well, he could not get the Indian to say more than that Velvet Bill would be along on time, and he was to have such a horse ready for him.

The fact that Velvet Bill had an Indian com-

panion and that the Assassins of the Trails were Indians under a white master, presented itself to Frank Powell as a suspicious circumstance.

After seeing that the Comanche was non-committal, the surgeon had his supper, replenished his haversack of provisions, and went on his way along the trail toward Miner's Roost.

But he left it soon after, made a flank movement over to the Fatal Trail, and there went into camp for the balance of the night.

He was up at dawn, for it was Velvet Bill's day to go through to the fort, and glancing at the trail he saw fresh tracks.

Velvet Bill had already passed, and ahead of time.

The hoof-tracks were iron-shod, and the shoes seemed new, and Surgeon Powell had noticed that the horse to be ridden by the Pony Rider, as Comanche had said, had just been shod.

He had pretended the greatest interest in the gambler's horses, and noted the shoe well on the horse to be put on the run to Fort Venture.

The horse that had just passed had certainly been newly shod.

So the Surgeon Scout mounted and rapidly followed on the trail of the Pony Rider, wondering why he was so far ahead of time.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TRACKING ODDS.

It was not the intention of the Surgeon Scout to overhaul the Pony Rider.

He neither wished to do that, nor to let him know that he was behind him.

So he dismounted, and taking from a saddle-pocket some rubber shoes, made as muffers for his horse's hoofs, he put them on and went again to the work of following the trail.

The result was that even in a gallop the hoofs gave only a dull sound, which could only be heard a few yards distant.

Halting to listen, the Surgeon Scout could hear the ring of iron against the rocky ground, as the Pony Rider went on his way.

With a long ride before him on one horse, the Pony Rider naturally held him at a moderate speed, and the pursuer kept on in his rear until he had a distant view of the horseman.

He drew his horse to a quick halt behind the rise, crept to the top and turned his powerful field-glass upon him.

The horseman was half a mile in advance, but there was the shapely form in the velvet coat, the broad-brimmed sombrero, the high boots, fine black horse, in fact it could only be the Pony Rider Velvet Bill.

"I must not crowd him too close, for he is on the watch constantly; and a quick glance behind him might discover me.

"I will keep just out of sight," and with this the Scouting Surgeon mounted again and held on at a slackened pace.

At length he came to the hill which looked over into the barren valley known as the Bad Lands.

And it was in this desolate valley that the Pony Riders had so often met their death.

Upon one side of the valley was a rocky, impenetrable ridge, and across from it several miles was the river with its wild and cliff-like banks.

The trail led through the center of the valley, here and there broken by piled-up masses of rocks, lonely boulders, divides and an occasional tree, or a group of unhealthy-looking trees.

The valley was a number of miles long and had the appearance of having been, centuries before, the bed of a salt lake, so destitute of verdure it was.

And along this valley wound what was known as the Fatal Trail.

Along this trail were the graves of many a gallant Pony Rider, and others, too, had met their death in the inhospitable region.

But such was the nature of the country that it was not believed that other trails could be made to Jumping Off City from the fort, without passing through the dismal valley.

From his point of observation, Surgeon Powell had a view of this valley of death for miles.

He had crossed it back and forth in his ride down from the fort, and men had said that Go-won-go, the Indian Rider, knew other trails, secret ones where none were supposed to exist, and had thus avoided the Secret Ambushers, who never knew where to look for them.

Be this as it may, the Surgeon Scout had never been told of such trails by the Red Butterfly, and if they existed, he knew nothing of them, nor did any other scout at the fort that he had heard discuss the matter.

But then that country had been the Indian Rider's favorite hunting grounds when, as a boy, he roamed about with his red-skin father, known also as Go-won-ga,* the exiled chief, and who was also called Patolla, the Mad Chief.

Taking his position behind a rock, the Surgeon Scout leveled his glass upon the valley trail.

*The name Go-won-go signifies Red Butterfly—the name Go-won-ga is Majestic Palm.—THE AUTHOR.

Far ahead he saw the Pony Rider, and, could he believe what his glass also revealed to him?

He looked, rubbed the glasses, then his eyes, and looked again.

There, coming from the direction of the river, across the desolate valley, directly toward the Fatal Trail, was a party of horsemen.

They were Indians, or costumed as such, and eight in number.

But they were not all Indians, for one was a pale-face.

It was a woman.

She was mounted well, rode with the ease of a perfect horseman, and her habit was of blue, trimmed with brass buttons and gold lace, while she wore a sombrero looped up upon one side.

This the glass revealed to the Surgeon Scout, and it seemed to stagger him.

The Indians were riding behind her, a hundred feet away.

She was not a prisoner, that was certain.

And she was riding directly toward the Pony Rider, who, upon seeing her, had come to a halt on the trail.

The Surgeon Scout kept his glass to his eyes, and saw the horsewoman and the Pony Rider meet.

He could not tell exactly at that distance, but it looked to him like a very cordial meeting, while the Indians halted some distance away.

"Now I understand it all," muttered Frank Powell.

"The gambler has found Miss Seeley before, but she is now going on to the fort with him, having delayed her return for some purpose.

"But what are the Indians there for, and where has she been in hiding all this time?"

"I could go on and join them, but I will not spoil Velvet Bill's success by showing myself, so will follow them slowly to the fort."

But even as he spoke to himself, Velvet Bill rode on, and alone, the horsewoman returned toward the Indians, who followed in her rear back the way they had come.

"I cannot understand that; but I will follow their trail, whatever the odds against me."

So saying, Surgeon Powell waited until the red-skins went out of sight, and then slowly rode down into the valley to strike their trail.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE DENIAL.

WITH more anxiety than ever before did Colonel Seeley watch for the coming of the Pony Rider, when his time for arrival drew near.

Lieutenant Andrew Ames also most anxiously awaited his coming, for of course the colonel would then know the truth.

But would Velvet Bill bring Alice Seeley with him?

That was the question which the young officer asked himself over and over again.

"Will he bring my daughter?"

That was the thought repeating itself in the colonel's mind all the time.

But the time passed and Velvet Bill did not put in an appearance.

It was hard for the colonel to control himself; but he paced his room to and fro, his lips set, his face stern.

An hour went by and the Pony Rider did not appear.

Two hours passed and Velvet Bill was not reported in sight.

Three hours had gone by, and the suspense was becoming unbearable to Colonel Seeley, when the call of the sentinel in the watch-tower announced that the Pony Rider was in sight.

Colonel Seeley strode to the door to ask the orderly if he was alone, when Lieutenant Ames appeared, and said:

"I just descended from the tower, sir, and the Pony Rider is alone."

The colonel shut his teeth hard, and then said:

"Lieutenant Ames, send the prisoner in the guard-house here; he answers to the name of Terror Tom."

"Send him by the rear way, for I do not wish the Pony Rider to see him."

"There is no need of a guard; but I will wish you to be here too."

"I will bring the man myself, sir, and wait outside until needed," and the lieutenant departed upon his errand.

Meanwhile the Pony Rider had neared the fort, coming at a full run, and when soon after he dashed into the parade a cheer greeted him.

He acknowledged the cheer in his courtly way, took his pouches, and strode toward the colonel's quarters.

The orderly had orders to admit him at once, and to take his stand on the walk and allow no one to pass.

Just before Velvet Bill reached the door Colonel Seeley heard a knock at the rear entrance which told him of the arrival of the lieutenant and the prisoner.

Velvet Bill came in with his usual manner, saluted and said:

"I have brought a valuable money package, Colonel Seeley, for Paymaster Birney."

"Here it is, sir."

"And what else have you brought, sir?"

"A package of official papers for you, sir."

"And what else?"

"The mail, Colonel Seeley."

"Nothing else?"

"No, sir, for there was nothing else to bring, and the station-agent at Dismal City did not wish me to attempt to bring the money through, saying you had best send an escort after it."

"When did you leave Dismal City, sir?"

"On time, sir."

"Where did you stop en route?"

"At the relays, at Miner's Roost and Jumping Off City."

"Whom did you see on the way?"

"Not a soul, sir, on the trails away from the camp."

"Well, Velvet Bill, let me ask you whom you saw on your way from the fort on the night you left here?"

"Not a soul, sir, except in the camps."

"You met no one?"

"No one, sir."

"Velvet Bill, suppose I confront you with one who saw you meet some one?"

"It is not possible, Colonel Seeley, and I do not understand what you wish to know from me, for your questions incline me to think that you believe I am deceiving you."

In response the colonel stepped to the door and called in Terror Tom.

The latter had not a happy look at having to face Velvet Bill, who regarded him with a look of contempt while he said:

"Do you bring that creature as a witness against me, Colonel Seeley?"

"I do; for he has twice seen you on the trail when you were joined by some one."

"When and where, sir?"

Terror Tom told his story, at the command of Colonel Seeley, and in spite of an effort to show utter unconcern, Velvet Bill's face wore an anxious expression which the commandant did not fail to observe.

"Do you deny the statements of this man, Velvet Bill?"

"I do, sir, for it is not true that he saw me as he states he did," came the clear, firm response.

The colonel stepped to the door and called in Lieutenant Ames.

"Mr. Ames, will you repeat to me when and where you saw this man last, and under what circumstances?"

"I will do so, sir," and the story of the lieutenant was repeated.

"Do you deny that Lieutenant Ames also saw you, Velvet Bill?"

"Colonel Seeley, that creature, known as Terror Tom, I would not believe under oath."

"He is my foe, and vowed to destroy me."

"As for Lieutenant Ames's statement, I can only say that I believe he is honest in thinking that he saw me, and also your daughter."

"But, sir, he is mistaken."

"That is all I have to say, sir."

"Orderly!" and the colonel's voice rung out sternly.

"Yes, sir."

"Send a sergeant and file of men here to arrest this man."

"I submit to my fate, Colonel Seeley," and the voice of the Pony Rider was unmoved, while, as he was led away, he bowed politely to the colonel and Lieutenant Ames, though the look he gave Terror Tom made that worthy shudder.

CHAPTER XL.

THE INDIAN PONY RIDER.

COLONEL SEELEY was in the greatest distress imaginable.

His daughter had been spirited away, as he believed, and all search for her was utterly fruitless.

Yet, while he mourned for her, news came to him that she had been seen with Velvet Bill, a man to whom he had become really attached, in the time that he had known him.

The testimony of Terror Tom, straight as it appeared, he would have doubted; but he could not doubt that of Lieutenant Ames.

Then came the flat denial of the Pony Rider to the accusations, and Colonel Seeley could only see his way clear to put him at once under arrest.

To Terror Tom he said, as soon as he had seen the gambler depart under guard:

"Now, sir, go the quartermaster, get what food you need, mount your horse and leave the fort."

"If I hear of you hanging about the trails I will have you shot without trial."

"If I need your testimony again I shall send to Dismal City for you; but beware how you talk."

"Go, sir!"

"I thanks yer, colonel, and I'll light out in mighty quick time."

"My address be Dismal City, and ef yer wants me thar I will be found, unless I has tarning up my toes."

"I thanks you, loot'nent, fer provin' me a honest man, fer I'd 'a' been sot down as a liar ef yer hadn't seen what I see."

"Ta-ta, gents," and with an awkward salute the man was gone, the orderly going with him to escort him out of the fort.

He had kept his word in losing no time, and struck out on the Fatal Trail with his horse in a full gallop.

The truth must be told that Terror Tom was content to have Velvet Bill a prisoner, while he shook hands with himself as he rode along, congratulating himself upon his very close call.

"Thet were a very close call fer me, as ther colonel hain't a man ter stand nonsense."

"I begin ter feel as though I were a goner; but ther loot'nent helped me out— Now who in jumping wild-cats be that?"

"It do be another Pony Rider, sart'in."

His last remark referred to a horseman he saw coming like the wind up the trail.

He was well mounted, and his horse was stretched out at full speed.

As he drew nearer Terror Tom gave a low whistle, for in the dark face, long hair and gay costume of the horseman, he recognized one well known upon the trail.

Had it been anywhere else, far from the fort, he might have tried to drop the rider and get his valuables, as he supposed he must be a special, carrying rich packages.

But he did not wish to get himself into trouble, so wisely forbore with the remark:

"As I am a livin' sinner, it be the Red Butterfly."

The Pony Rider was nearly up to him now, and without a word, only a look, flew by, but in an instant his horse had been brought to a halt, thrown back on his haunches, wheeled around on his hind legs as though on a pivot, and Terror Tom found himself covered, while sharply came the words:

"Hands up, pard!"

"Who are you and what doing on this trail?"

Terror Tom was caught wholly off his guard, and turned pale as he looked into the muzzle of the revolver.

But he had the very good sense to obey, holding his hands above his head with an alacrity that was ludicrous.

"Lordy, Butterfly, don't yer know yer old friend, Tom, o' Jumping Off City?" he said with a giggle.

"You were never friend of mine; but I know you now, and I was right that you were bad medicine."

"What are you doing here?"

"I jist come from ther fort, whar I hev been ter see Colonel Seeley, who wanted me for a leetle business."

"Ah! caught you robbing, or killing—which?"

"See here, Pard Injin, I hain't one ter put up with such talk."

"I know you, and I will be on the safe side."

"Here, hold out your hands!"

The man sullenly obeyed, and pulling a pair of steel handcuffs from a saddle-pouch the Indian slipped them upon his wrists.

"Now I'll take hold of your stake-line, and back to the fort you go."

"Quick!"

Terror Tom swore vigorously, but it was no use, his horse was urged into a run, and half an hour after the sentinel reported a Pony Rider and Terror Tom coming back.

When they dashed into the fort and Red Butterfly was recognized, cheer after cheer went up for him, for he was supposed by all to be an Indian youth.

The cheers were heard by Velvet Bill and he quickly asked the cause, and was told that Red Butterfly had come in with a prisoner.

"Thank Heaven he has come; but what prisoner has he brought in?" asked the gambler somewhat anxiously.

"It is Terror Tom, that border tramp who left here an hour ago, sir."

"Ah! caught him in some deviltry, I suppose, and yanked him back again."

In the mean while the Red Butterfly had gone to headquarters to report, his prisoner with him, and a look of amazement and pleasure commingled came over the face of Colonel Seeley as he saw the Indian youth, and exclaimed:

"Red Butterfly, you here again?"

"Yes, sir, and I am here to report as Pony Express Rider," was the response of Go-won-go.

CHAPTER XLI.

TRUE AS STEEL.

NEXT to the appearance of his loved daughter, at that moment, Colonel Seeley would have wished to see Go-won-go, the Pony Rider.

He had intended sending an escort with the mail and Express to Dismal City, as Velvet Bill was under arrest, and was most anxious to get Surgeon Powell's dispatch to the Indian Rider, for the colonel had it in his possession and was going to add a few lines on his own account.

Therefore his surprise and pleasure were great to see Go-won-go enter his quarters.

He greeted him with exceeding warmth and then said:

"What lucky wind has blown you here, Go-won-go, just when I needed you most?"

"I received an urgent appeal to come, sir, from Velvet Bill, who told me in his letter of the sad blow that had fallen upon you in the kidnapping of Miss Seeley, sir."

"You received a letter from Velvet Bill?" asked the colonel with surprise.

"Yes, sir, it was sent through to me with all haste, and I left the day I received it."

"I hoped to have caught him at Dismal City but arrived some hours after his departure, so pushed on at full speed."

"He has arrived, has he not, sir?" and Go-won-go appeared anxious.

"Yes, he is here," and Colonel Seeley glanced at Lieutenant Ames, who sat in silence regarding the Indian, after his first greeting of him.

"Yes, he is here; but what have you got that man a prisoner for?"

"I arrested him, sir, upon general principles, knowing him to be an unmitigated scamp."

"I met him on the trail, and took the idea he was there for mischief, so did not believe his story, that he had been to see you, and brought him back."

The colonel smiled sadly, and Terror Tom looked at him to see if he was to be held on "general principles."

"Let him go, Red Butterfly, for I allowed him to depart."

The irons were taken off quickly, and Go-won-go said:

"You were innocent this once, Terror Tom, but look out for next time."

"I'll do it, and keep my eye on you, Injun," growled Terror Tom, as he walked away to his horse.

"Now, Go-won-go, you say you have come back to ride Pony Express?"

"Yes, Colonel Seeley, and at the same time do detective work to hunt down the kidnappers of Miss Seeley, for by my relieving Velvet Bill he will be free to act as he wished to do for her rescue."

"Go-won-go, I am glad you have come, for we have no Pony Rider now, as Ben was killed and Pony Bob is lying badly wounded."

"But Velvet Bill, sir?"

"Is under arrest."

The Indian's dark face changed hue, and the words were sternly uttered:

"Velvet Bill under arrest, sir?"

"Yes."

"May I ask of what he has been accused?"

"I will tell you the whole story, Go-won-go, and Lieutenant Ames is here to vouch for the charge he makes against Velvet Bill being true."

Go-won-go seemed ill at ease, and said:

"I believe, sir, all charges against Velvet Bill can be shown to be without sufficient cause, or, if he has done that which he is condemned for, he can show good reason for his acts."

"You are as true as steel to your friends, Go-won-go, and it is a good trait; but you shall hear the whole story, from the kidnapping of my poor daughter up to the arrest of Velvet Bill."

"But now go and seek rest and food, if you expect to go out with the mail to-night."

"I do not need rest or food, sir," almost fretfully said Go-won-go.

"I will go out to-night, sir, on the return ride; but I wish you would now be good enough to let me understand the charges against Velvet Bill, for it was his letter that brought me here."

"Have you his letter with you?"

"No, sir, I left it in one to my adopted father, explaining my leaving home as I did, and knowing that when he knew I came at the call of Velvet Bill, and to aid in the rescue of your daughter, he would feel that I had done right, my duty as I saw it."

"It was very noble of you, Go-won-go, and I shall at once make known to you the situation, and see what that level head of yours sees in it."

The story was then told, from the threat of the Ambushers pinned upon the pillow of Alice Seeley, up to the arrest of Velvet Bill after his denial of having been seen by Terror Tom and Lieutenant Ames.

Red Butterfly listened to all with an interest that seemed painful to him.

Now and then he asked a question in a sharp tone, devoid of his usual respectful manner, which was marked.

At last he said decidedly:

"I do not wish to doubt your word, Lieutenant Ames; but if it was Velvet Bill, he has deceived you, Colonel Seeley, for some good purpose."

CHAPTER XLII.

A BLIND WITNESS.

"AS I said before, Go-won-go, you are true as steel to your enemies, yes, and to your foes, too, for that matter; but I tried hard to believe as you feel, so did Lieutenant Ames, and also Surgeon Powell," said Colonel Seeley, after the Indian Rider's belief in Velvet Bill's good motives if really guilty.

"Where is Surgeon Powell, sir?"

"He is away on the trail, and alone."

"He went to discover what he could in the matter, for he could hardly believe Velvet Bill would play me false."

"Do you expect Surgeon Powell back soon, sir?"

"Yes, he said he would doubtless follow Velvet Bill in."

"Then he should soon be here, sir."

"Yes, especially as Velvet Bill is generally late on his rides."

"Late, sir?"

"Yes, he came in to-day, nearly three hours late."

"And he was several hours ahead of me, Colonel Seeley?"

"Yes."

"I hope Surgeon Powell will soon come in, sir, for I would like to see him before I start on my ride back, and also to know what he now says about Velvet Bill."

"Yes, I wish you to hear, Go-won-go."

"Could I see Velvet Bill, sir?"

"I am pained to have to refuse you, Red Butterfly."

"As I saw my duty, I had to, under the circumstances, arrest Velvet Bill."

"I have ordered that no one be allowed to speak to him except the guard, and I cannot permit you to do so."

"Then I must go it alone in the duty before me, Colonel Seeley?"

"I came here to aid in the rescue of Miss Seeley by riding Pony Express for Velvet Bill."

"Nothing else, sir, than the danger of your daughter would have brought me here, and now, as my ally is in durance vile, I must also set him free by proving his innocence."

"But let me say, Colonel Seeley, great as seems this double undertaking, I do not shrink from it one iota."

And the look upon the face of the Indian Pony Rider showed a determined resolve not to flinch from what he had cut out for himself to perform.

"Surgeon Powell, sir," said the orderly, entering.

"I will see him at once, orderly," cried the colonel, while Go-won-go seemed pleased to hear of his coming.

The Surgeon Scout came in looking travel-stained and weary; but his handsome face brightened up when he saw Go-won-go, and seizing his hand he said, quickly:

"Now, Colonel Seeley, I have an ally that is worth a regiment of soldiers; but, pardon me, sir, as I was so rejoiced to see Red Butterfly."

And the surgeon had quite forgotten the deference due his colonel.

"You are more than excusable, Surgeon Powell, for my surprise and pleasure at Go-won-go's coming were as great as yours."

"But he will not believe Velvet Bill guilty."

"Pardon me, Colonel Seeley; I would not doubt Colonel Ames's assertion that he saw Velvet Bill, as he states, but I do maintain that, if guilty, it is for some good reason which he can fully explain."

"That is another way of looking at it, Colonel Seeley, which I had not thought of; but Velvet Bill is guilty, whatever his motive," impressively said the Surgeon Scout.

"You have seen him, then, Powell?" eagerly said the colonel, and all breathlessly awaited his answer.

"I have, sir."

"Where?"

"I went to Jumping Off City and tried to glean some news from his Indian companion there, but was unsuccessful."

"I left on the trail for Miner's Roost, flanked to the left and camped on the Fatal Trail."

"To my surprise when day dawned I saw that some one had just gone by."

"The horse was newly shod, and the Indian pard of Velvet Bill had just had the horse shod, which the Pony Rider was to take from there."

"I knew that he was some hours ahead of time, and this surprised me."

"But I followed, came to a rise where I saw the horseman, and recognized him."

"It was Velvet Bill?" eagerly asked the colonel.

"Either Velvet Bill, sir, or his double."

"Then too he was mounted upon a large bay, and it was a bay I had seen newly shod at Jumping Off City."

"I dropped back out of sight and followed in a slow canter."

"When I reached the ridge which goes over into the Valley of Death, I dismounted and leveled my glass."

"There was Velvet Bill, and going toward him across the valley, from the direction of the river, I saw a body of Indians, eight in number, all mounted."

"Ahead of these Indians was a lady on horseback."

"My daughter?" almost groaned Colonel Seeley.

"It was Miss Seeley, sir, or her double."

"A prisoner?"

"No, sir, she was not a prisoner to my thinking."

"Well?"

"The horseman—"

"Velvet Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"He raised his hat, and she waved her handkerchief, and the two met on the Fatal Trail."

"The Indians?"

"Halted a hundred yards away, sir."

"Yes, Powell."

"I held my glass upon the two, and they talked together for some time."

"You were near enough to see them distinctly?"

"With my glasses, yes, sir, for I was something over half a mile away."

"Then they parted, the man continuing on along the trail, the lady going back the way she had come, the Indians falling in behind as before and following her."

CHAPTER XLIII.

GO-WON-GO RIDES THE FATAL TRAIL.

SURGEON POWELL paused in his narrative, after having stated that the Pony Rider separated from the horsewoman and the Indians, and from the lips of Colonel Seeley came the lowly-uttered words:

"The third witness."

"Can he, too, be mistaken?"

"I may be, Colonel Seeley, for before a court of justice I would not take oath that I saw either your daughter or Velvet Bill; but if I did not, then I saw their doubles, sir, if such things are, and I have had experience that tells me they are."

"And the Pony Rider came on alone, Powell?"

"Yes, sir."

"While the one you supposed was my daughter, followed by the Indians, went back toward the river?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the Indians seemed more of an escort for her than a guard?"

"So I took it, sir."

"What did you do then?"

"I waited until all had gotten out of sight, and then I rode down into the valley, sir, at the place where I had seen the meeting."

"The Pony Rider I had expected to see take Miss Seeley, if she it was, on with him to the fort, and I would not show myself, not wishing to spoil his rescue of her alone, for I supposed, from the report of Lieutenant Ames, that she had awaited Velvet Bill's return before going to Fort Venture."

"But my amazement was very great when I saw them part."

"I could no longer see any motive for Miss Seeley to remain away, if it was in her power to go to you, sir."

"The Indians did not appear to be her foes, nor the foes of the Pony Rider, and yet she went one way and the horseman went on up the Fatal Trail."

"This decided me in following her."

"Ah!"

"I argued that the Pony Rider was going to the fort, so why follow him, when, if he did come here, I would arrive in time to report what I had seen before his departure upon his night ride back again?"

"You argued well, Doctor Powell."

"So you followed the—the others?"

"Yes, sir; I went to the scene of the meeting, picked up the trail and followed it toward the river."

"You are aware, sir, of the nature of the land in the barren valley, and it was slow work following the trail over the rocks."

"But I managed to do so for half a dozen miles, it leading toward the river cliffs the scouts call the Castle."

"But try as I might I could not see the trace of a trail as I neared the cliffs."

"It was utterly lost, as we have lost their trails before, and as there were a dozen different ways they could have gone, all leaving no trail, I was forced to come on to the fort, as I was anxious to see if Velvet Bill had come in, and what excuse he had to make for not bringing Miss Seeley in with him, when it seemed so wholly in his power to do so."

"He came alone, Surgeon Powell, and denied in toto that he was the man seen by that villain, and afterward by Lieutenant Ames."

"He denies it, sir?"

"Yes, and I placed him under arrest."

"I cannot well see how you could do anything else, sir."

"It is a most painful situation for me, as you know, and I am glad to have your testimony of what you saw."

"I am more glad to know that the Red Butterfly is here once more to ride Pony Express, and I can only wait the development of matters, whatever it may be."

"As for myself, I shall give no more orders for a search for my daughter, but accept the situation as it is, though with an abiding faith in her, and that though she remains away, it is to accomplish some good."

"Colonel Seeley, as you have expressed confidence in me, sir, may I ask if you will allow me to work out this mystery in my own way?" said Go-won-go.

"I have faith enough in you, Go-won-go, to say that you may do so," earnestly said the colonel.

"But Velvet Bill must still remain a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"And, Colonel Seeley, will you instruct Surgeon Powell to obey my wishes without question?"

It was a bold request to make, and the colonel looked critically at Red Butterfly.

Then he turned his gaze upon the Surgeon Scout, who had seemed amused at the request of Go-won-go.

"What do you say to this, Surgeon Powell?"

"I know of no ally I would rather have, sir, for any work than Go-won-go."

"We have been together before upon two successful trails, and I believe I then followed his directions, so I am willing to place myself under his orders, Colonel Seeley, especially in so good a cause."

"Then he is to obey me, Colonel Seeley?"

"Yes."

"You hear, Surgeon Powell?"

"I do."

"Thank you," and turning to Colonel Seeley, Go-won-go continued:

"I will go and prepare for my ride, sir, and report when ready," and the Red Butterfly left the colonel's quarters.

"What do you think of that strange request of his, for you to obey his orders, Powell?" asked the colonel.

"Go-won-go is a mystery, Colonel Seeley, I never could fathom, and he doubtless saw some way in which I could help him, and so made the request."

"As for myself I do not believe I can go far wrong in following his orders," and the Surgeon Scout and Lieutenant Ames also took their leave, while Colonel Seeley was left to his own gloomy reflections, and gloomy indeed they were, though he had not lost faith in his devotedly-loved daughter.

Soon after the Red Butterfly reported, ready for his ride, and he shot away from the fort like an arrow, amid the cheers of the soldiers who were glad to welcome him back, for known only as a youth then, I must still refer to Go-won-go as him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MYSTERY GROWS DEEPER.

OF course under the circumstances, the Fatal Trail was regarded as more dangerous than ever, and the chances were set down against Go-won-go as greater by far than he had before risked.

Why Velvet Bill had been put under arrest was not known to other than the colonel and those most intimately connected with him, for Terror Tom had very shrewdly kept his own counsel upon that subject.

Before going, the Red Butterfly had not even seen Surgeon Powell again, so that that officer was at a loss as to what his "orders" would be from the Pony Rider.

"Doctor Powell knew that it would be days before the Red Butterfly's return, so he patiently waited for the time to come when he should discover what the plan of the Indian Rider was."

The day after Go-won-go's departure he obtained the permission of Colonel Seeley to see if he could discover anything from Velvet Bill.

Armed with a pass he went to the guard-house and found the gambler enjoying a cigar after his dinner.

He did not seem very much cast down by his situation, greeted the surgeon pleasantly, and said:

"I am glad to feel that Red Butterfly is back again, Surgeon Powell."

"Do you know why he came?"

The question was asked as though he did not himself know.

"Oh, yes, I wrote to him to come, for I wished his aid in ferreting out this mystery, and I knew he would aid me in the rescue of Miss Seeley."

"You know I vowed to save her, Powell?"

"Yes, the colonel told me you did."

"Well, I shall keep that vow."

Surgeon Powell looked at the courtly gambler in surprise.

A man in prison asserting what he intended to do.

So he said:

"If you can do so, why not do so now?"

"If I was free, now that Red Butterfly is here to ride Pony Express, I could do so in a short while."

"The colonel will not let you go free."

"I am sure of that, and I cannot blame him, for appearances are very black against me, since Lieutenant Ames says that he saw me."

"Another than Lieutenant Ames saw you."

"That wretch, Terror Tom—bah!"

"No; still another."

"Who was he?"

"I saw you."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Come, now, when was this?"

"I saw you, or your double—"

"Or my what?" quickly asked the gambler.

"Your double."

"Yes, go on."

"I say that I saw you or your double riding the Fatal Trail yesterday morning."

"I followed you—"

"Or my shadow—"

"Yes; and saw a lady on horseback riding across the valley toward the trail."

"A lady?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"No."

"Who was with her?"

"Eight Indians."

"Indians?"

"Yes."

"White men painted as Indians?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"I know an Indian from a white man under any disguise, Velvet Bill."

"True, and those were Indians?"

"They were."

"And they had the lady a prisoner?"

"She did not appear to be, for they followed in single file some distance behind her."

"And then?"

With his piercing eyes, which had made many a man quail before them in anger, fixed upon the face of Velvet Bill, Surgeon Powell continued:

"And then she rode into the trail and met—"

"Me, or my double?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"For some time the two talked together, and—"

"Who was she?"

"Miss Seeley, or her double."

"Do you mean that you took the lady for Miss Seeley?"

"I do."

"You were near enough to know?"

"Yes, and had my glass."

"Well?"

"If it was not Miss Seeley it was her shadow, and if it was not you, it was your shadow."

"What occurred then, sir?"

"They parted."

"And the Indians?"

"Followed the lady back toward the river."

"And the man you took for me?"

"Came on toward the fort in a canter."

"This you reported to Colonel Seeley?"

"As in duty bound."

"Yes, I do not condemn you, Surgeon Powell, for I believe you implied to him that there might be a doubt as to the one you saw being me."

"I expected to see you bring Miss Seeley on to the fort; but when I saw her go back with the Indians, and you, if it was you, come on toward the fort, I felt that something was wrong."

"Then coming to the fort I learned that you had denied the evidences of all those who saw you."

"I do."

"You assert that it was not yourself?"

"I do; and do you believe that it was?"

"I have the evidences of my senses, and yet I may have been mistaken, though if it was not you, Velvet Bill, it was your exact counterpart."

"And Miss Seeley?"

"Yes."

"Surgeon Powell?"

"Yes."

"You must get the colonel to let me go free, for if I stay here I will be hanged for kidnapping Miss Seeley."

"If I am a free man, I can return her to her father, but not unless."

"He would never consent to your going free, Velvet Bill, until this mystery is cleared up."

"Then I must make my escape," was the very cool response of the gambler Pony Rider, to the great surprise of Surgeon Powell, who soon after took his leave more puzzled than ever.

CHAPTER XLV.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

THE news had spread along the Overland of the capture and supposed death of the daughter of Colonel Seeley, at the hands of the Secret Assassins of the Trails.

If they would be guilty of a defiance to the military commander, what would they not do?

If they would put an innocent girl to death, then it was time to find them out and hang the last one of the band.

The news also went along the camps of the return of Go-won-go, the Indian Rider of the Overland, and it was a surprise and pleasure, for the Red Butterfly was universally popular along the trails, and his daring won the admiration of all.

From Dismal City to Jumping Off City there was as much excitement among the miners at the various camps, as among the soldiers at the fort, only the latter suppressed their feelings.

Out of the fort went Go-won-go, many wondering that he had returned just in time to take the place of Velvet Bill, who had been arrested.

Whether it was that Terror Tom was afraid of being overtaken by the young rider, who had so summarily arrested him before, he certainly made very remarkable time upon his ride from the fort.

His horse had been rested, and with some half-dozen hours start he had kept up a lively pace.

As Velvet Bill was no longer the King Sport in Jumping Off City he did not fear to go to that delectable mining-camp, especially as he had news of importance to tell.

So along the Fatal Trail he dashed, and it was

late in the night when the lights of Jumping Off City came into view.

Not a soul had he seen on the trail, and he was delighted that he had not.

Riding up to the tavern stables he dismounted, and, after a careful reconnaissance about the premises, stalked in like a man who had no fear.

All recognized him, and a hush fell upon the crowd, which he was careful to take advantage of, for he said, quickly:

"Evenin', pards, all! I has news fer yer."

"What news?"

"Has yer pards been hanged?"

"And you escaped?"

"What game are yer givin' us?"

Terror Tom was not exactly pleased with this reception.

In going to the fort he had passed Jumping Off City by.

But he thought now he could stop there, as he had something to tell.

His audience, not seeing the other two, Dick and Harry, felt no awe of the one man, especially as he had had his claws clipped, as they expressed it, by the gambler, Velvet Bill.

"Pards, I has just come from ther fort, and ther Red Butterfly are ridin' ther Overland ag'in."

"Yer is tellin' us ancient hist'ry, Terror Tom, for we seen ther Red Rider go through here this morning," said one.

"But thet hain't all, pards."

"Waal, out with yer gush, ef yer has any-thing ter talk," said an angry voice.

"Red Butterfly takes ther place o' Velvet Bill."

"Has Velvet Bill been killed?"

Fifty voices asked the question, and it came in a perfect roar that made Terror Tom shudder, and showed him that the gambler was still king there, that he was the miners' idol.

"No, pards, he hain't been kilt, but he hev been arrested."

"Arrested?"

"Yas."

"What hev he done?"

"It were he who run off ther colonel's pretty darter, and he hev got her in hidin' now."

"And is that all?"

"Waal, I'm afraid he is goin' to find it a severe *all*, pards."

Had Terror Tom told the miners that Velvet Bill was a prisoner at Miner's Roost, or Dismal City, the whole population of Jumping Off City would have at once moved upon the place that dared hold their King of Sports.

But with the army it was different.

They were glad to know that Velvet Bill had run off with the colonel's daughter; it was a feather in the gambler's cap, they took it, and yet what could they do to help him out, for they dared not fight the Government.

What their decision might have been, no one could tell, as suddenly a revolver was thrust into Terror Tom's face, and the words were heard:

"Me want you—come!"

The speaker was Comanche, Velvet Bill's Indian pard, and he had Terror Tom covered.

CHAPTER XLVI.

COMANCHE HOLDS TRUMPS.

TERROR TOM was so completely taken by surprise that his face was a picture of despair and amazement combined.

No one had seen the Indian enter until he suddenly, with a leap like a panther, confronted the desperado and thrust his revolver in his face.

If the man expected sympathy from those present, he was woefully mistaken, for a perfect yell of laughter went up from the delighted crowd.

"Go in, Injun, and win!"

"Kill him, Comanche!"

"Scalp him!"

"He's no good!"

"Don't surrender, Terror Tom!"

"Jump on him, Tom!"

Such were the cries, and the white man certainly was in a perilous situation.

He looked appealingly around the room for some friendly face.

But he had, with his two comrades, bullied all he came in contact with, so no one felt pity for him.

Many a man had been killed in cold blood by that Trio of Terrors, and now no one had mercy for one who had never been merciful to others.

"Come! me want Tom."

The Indian had his eyes upon the face of the outlaw, and the muzzle of his revolver was right on his nose.

Tom had put up his hands involuntarily to prevent a death-shot, and there he stood, a picture of fright and misery.

Comanche did not move.

What he wanted was his game, and he meant to take it off.

"Come!" he said, for the third time.

"Whar ther blazes does yer want me ter go, Injun?" howled Terror Tom.

The Indian reached forward his left hand,

unbuckled the belt of his victim and took it off.

"Me want Tom. Come!" he repeated.

What the desperado saw in the face of the Comanche caused him to at once step forward toward the door, while a dozen miners began to whistle the appropriate air of the Rogue's March.

Out of the door went Terror Tom, now terrified Tom, and his red captor, and some of the miners were going to follow.

But Comanche wheeled around, so as to still keep his grip on the bully, while he covered the crowd with his revolver, and said:

"No want!"

"Go back!"

"We'll do it."

"You bet!"

"I hain't curious."

"You kin have him," and with like expressions the crowd fell back in confusion, while the door was closed quickly.

Instantly the red-skin seized the bully by the back of the neck, and rushed him along around the corner of the hotel at a tremendous speed, and which Terror Tom, strong as he was, could not resist.

He stopped at the door of Velvet Bill's cabin, shoved Terror Tom in and followed quickly.

A light was there, and revealed very comfortable quarters.

The cabin was built as a wing to the tavern, and had three rooms.

One of these the gambler used as a bed-chamber, another as a sitting-room, and the third was Comanche's quarters.

That Velvet Bill was a man of luxurious tastes was evident by the furnishing of his cabin.

Here was a rustic table, a couple of easy-chairs, a bronze, swinging lamp, and some book-shelves filled with rare works, while a guitar and cornet hung upon the wall, which were also adorned with some very artistic paintings in oil and colors of border scenery, and sketches of camp scenes, Indians, Mexicans and miners.

There were brackets holding rifles, a pair of files, a sword, knives and pistols of various kinds.

The bed-room contained a hammock instead of a cot for a bed, a rude wardrobe filled with clothing, a chest and a few real luxuries for that far-away region.

Such was the home of Velvet Bill, into which the Comanche had so unceremoniously ushered, or rather shoved, Terror Tom.

"Now, Injun, what does yer want with me?" cried Terror Tom, looking around in a bewildered sort of way.

"Keep Tom here."

"What fer?"

"See if Velvet Bill die."

"Oh, no, he's all right," said Terror Tom, in a lively tone.

"If die, Tom die bad death."

"You see, Injun, he's only in a little trouble, and I was going to help him out."

"Tom heap big liar."

"Waal, I'll be durned! how this Injun kin talk English."

"It don't do ter trust a Injun or a Chineese fer a fool," muttered Terror Tom.

"See!" and Comanche slipped upon Terror Tom's wrists a pair of manacles.

Next he did the same for his feet, and carrying him into the next room put him on a large bear robe.

He then took a new chain, which he had gotten from the chest, and locked it around a beam of the cabin and through the manacles.

"All right," he said, complacently, and left the room and the cabin, while Terror Tom felt that he was anything else than all right.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MYSTERIOUS SIGNS.

WHEN Red Butterfly left the fort he went off like a rocket.

He was splendidly mounted upon one of Velvet Bill's horses, and he started straight down the prairie for the Fatal Trail.

For a while he held a good speed, then slackened his pace to a canter, and next to a walk.

Arriving near the entrance to the barren valley, he dismounted from his horse, and taking something from a saddle-pocket, just as the moon was rising to give him light, stepped up to a rock on the side of the trail and painted some strange character in what appeared in the moonlight to be black paint.

Then he put upon the hoofs of his horse some rubber mufles, and mounting, rode on down the trail for the distance of a mile.

Here he again dismounted and made the same signs upon a rock as he had previously done.

Then, remounting, he turned off directly from the trail, going toward the ridge.

He seemed to know every foot of the way, and rode at a canter.

At last the base of the ridge was reached, and halting, he made the same sign again upon a rock there.

Before him, some twenty feet up the rocky path, grew a clump of thick underbrush.

Right up the rocky side he went, leading his

horse, and pulling aside the bushes, his horse entered as though he had been through before.

The Red Rider followed, carefully arranging the bushes after him.

From beyond the bushes there was a shelf-like path, not visible below, winding upward and around a heavy mountain spur.

The horse followed it, though a slip would have sent him to his death below, a hundred feet or more.

At last the top of the ridge was reached, and from there two trails were visible.

Again the Red Butterfly took out his paint and brush, and another sign was painted upon a rock.

The first signs had been of a horse going at full speed.

This one was of an arrow.

Mounting his horse, now, the Indian Rider dashed on at a canter along the top of the ridge, the rubber-clad hoofs giving back no sound save a dull thud.

Far away upon his right was the Valley of Death, looking bleak and forbidding even in the moon's silvery light.

The horse did not seem to tire, and kept up his steady pace mile after mile.

At last the ridge began to slope, and ended in a stream.

Into this the Rider turned, and following its current, for it was hardly knee deep, at last branched off where there was a vast field of rock.

Across this he went, and came into the end of the Fatal Trail nearest to Jumping Off City.

Dismounting again, he painted upon one rock a running horse, upon another an arrow.

Once more he mounted, after having made these mysterious signs, and rode away at a rapid canter on the trail to Jumping Off City.

The moon had traveled far across the heavens now, and as a distant light came in sight, Red Butterfly put his horse into a run.

The late card-players were just ending their games when the Pony Rider dashed up, and they gave him a half-drunken cheer and crowded around to know the reason that Velvet Bill had been arrested.

"Who told you he had been arrested, pards, for I am just from the fort?" he asked, with surprise.

"Terror Tom."

"Ah! that fellow already here?"

"He came in about midnight, Pard Butterfly."

"I thought he had been driven away from here?"

"He were, by Velvet Bill, only ther sport hain't here now, and Tom says as how he were arrested for runnin' off with ther colonel's darter."

"Poor Velvet Bill is just now in hard luck, pards, for he is accused of several things that are bad; but don't you worry, for he'll come out with flying colors."

A cheer greeted these words of Red Rider, and then he asked, as his fresh horse was led up for his saddle and bridle to be put on:

"But where is this Terror Tom?"

"Dead, I guess," said a miner.

"Dead! did you all hang him?"

"No we didn't, and I'm durned sorry we didn't think of it."

"Why did you say he was dead then?"

"Oh, thet Injun o' Velvet Bill's comed inter ther saloon, while he were tellin' us about ther sport gittin' inter trouble, and he borry'd him."

"Borrowed him?"

"Yas, he led ther Terror out as meek as Moses's little lamb yer reads of in Scriptur'."

"The Indian took him away?"

"That's what he did."

"Well, I guess Comanche will take care of him."

"Good-night all," and leaping into his saddle, Red Butterfly was off on his ride to Miner's Roost, followed by a yell of admiration from the score of wild spirits who witnessed his departure, and coincided in the opinions expressed by one of their number:

"Thet are ther gamest piece o' humanity thet ever wore buckskin, pards."

At Miner's Roost, which he reached in daylight, Red Butterfly received another welcome of an uproarious kind, and when late at night he reached Dismal City, he found a crowd assembled at the tavern to greet him.

To Sunset Sam, the driver, and the "boss" of the coaches at Dismal City, he told of Velvet Bill's trouble, and then said:

"I am going to take my days off duty at the fort now, boss, instead of here, so I will start back this afternoon."

"You know best, Red Rider," replied the boss, and the Indian Rider started upon his return at the time he had set to leave on.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

TWO LOVERS.

THE surprise of receiving a letter from his adopted daughter, Go-won-go, telling him what she had done, whither she had gone, almost vanished under the joy of what she told him of Lucita's love for him.

He read and re-read the letter, understood

fully how the noble girl had been led to sacrifice herself for her parents and brother, who were selfish enough to demand it, and was glad that in Mr. Dillingham she had at least found a noble husband.

The fact that Go-won-go had gone again to the wild life of the border pained him deeply.

He was as dearly attached to the beautiful Indian girl as he would have been to an own daughter.

The way in which she had come into his care made her dear to him, and when he had lost his money, and going West to dig more gold had been captured by the outlaws, her noble devotion to him, going to rescue him, risking life, dressing as a man to do that which no woman could do, had endeared her the more to him.

He did not doubt but that she was able to take care of herself, that she had gone in a good cause, to aid in the rescue of Alice Seeley, yet he felt that he too should go.

While wondering what was best, what could he do better than seek advice from one who was her friend.

It was the very thing, and besides, it would give him a chance to again see the woman whom he had never ceased to love, who could alone take the shadow from his life, could bring perfect happiness into his heart.

So he packed up his traps, all ready to start on to the West after seeing Lucita Dillingham, had his man drive him to the station, caught the day boat down the Hudson from Albany, and in due time was put off at the village near the home of the beautiful widow.

Even then he was almost tempted to board the train on to New York.

But he summoned up courage, and hiring a hack left his traps at the landing and went to see Lucita Dillingham.

Had he been going to be hanged for horse-stealing in the West, or for cheating at cards in the mines, he could not have been more nervous.

Only what Go-won-go had said in her letter, that not knowing his reason had been restored, Lucita had confessed that she loved him, sustained him at all.

The hack drew up at the door, and the butler ushered him into the elegant parlors, asking for his card.

"Say an old friend," he said, slipping a gold piece into the hand of the butler, whom he envied for being allowed to be near Lucita Dillingham.

In the parlor was a full length portrait of Lucita, taken about the time of her marriage, and she was indeed a beautiful woman, he thought.

There was another portrait of one who he knew must have been her husband.

"A noble face, a good man, but more than double her age," he mused.

Then came the rustle of a dress and Lucita stood before him.

She was dressed in black, and far more beautiful now than as a young girl.

She saw before her a man of striking appearance, and whose silver hairs upon the temples and in the mustache had not come there from years, for he was still a few notches below forty.

Her beau ideal of perfect manhood was before her, and she knew him at a glance.

Her face crimsoned, for she feared Go-won-go had betrayed her; but she said in a composed way, which a woman can always assume under such circumstances, where a man goes all to pieces:

"Mr. Darwin, I am most happy to meet you again after all these years.

"How kind of you to come and renew the acquaintance of long ago."

"I am here, Mrs. Dillingham," he said, in a flurried way, the antithesis of her composure, "to tell you about my adopted daughter, Go-won-go, whom you know."

"Has harm befallen her?"

"Quick! tell me, Daniel," she said, with a slip of her tongue calling him by his Christian name.

At once he regained his nerve.

It was as though he had been confronted by odds and had suddenly gotten away with the worst part of the battle.

"I will tell you all about her, though no harm has come to her yet.

"She has gone to the frontier, to the mining-camps again, having received this letter in my absence from home and departing over a week ago, so I come to you for advice, Lucita."

He handed over Velvet Bill's letter, and the beautiful woman read it through.

Then he told her all he knew of her intentions for he dared not show her the letter left by the Indian girl on account of her reference to Lucita herself in it.

"Well, Daniel, the Indian blood in the girl will exert itself, and she seems to really love the wild life in spite of her refinement and the really perfect education which you have given her.

"She loved Miss Seeley, who was her school-mate, and she has friends there not only in the mines, but in Sunset Sam the driver, Surgeon Powell, Buffalo Bill and others, not to speak of

that mysterious man Velvet Bill, of whom I heard so much, and in whom she placed so much confidence.

"No, I cannot believe that she will be allowed to go into too great danger, for Surgeon Powell and Colonel Seeley, she told me, knew that she was an Indian girl.

"She says she will write, so wait and see if her letter calls for your going, and if so I would go myself if I could serve the noble girl."

And such was the advice given, such was the advice taken, and Daniel Darwin was happy in being once more near the woman from whom a cruel fate had parted him for long years.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AN OUTLAW BROTHER.

In his anxiety about Go-won-go, Daniel Darwin would have gone at once to the West, had not the influence of Lucita Dillingham restrained him.

He seemed to feel that this was his duty to follow the Indian girl to the frontier, and protect her all in his power.

That Lucita had some secret motive for urging him not to go, he felt assured, and at last said to her:

"Lucita, what is your reason that I should not go?"

She seemed worried at the question and then her face lighted up as she said:

"I will make a clean breast of it, Daniel, for I intended some day to tell you the truth, a truth that cuts me to the heart."

"Perhaps when I know all it will not be so hard for you to bear."

"It will not."

"Then tell me."

"Do you know that you have not once asked me about my brother?"

"Poor Frank! I heard that he had met with much trouble."

"Worse than that, and he does not command your sympathy in the slightest degree."

"So bad as that?"

"You shall know, and far better had it been had you never swum out into the lake that day and saved his life.

"I have at times thought, in my saddest moments, that I too could have died then.

"But Frank was a wild fellow, always reckless, selfish, and given to dissipation.

"He never appreciated that you risked your life and saved his and mine.

"He had gone beyond his means, and so frequently raised money upon forging my father's indorsement to notes.

"He protected one note by forging another, and each time they grew larger, until at last they could not be met.

"He had also forged Mr. Dillingham's name, and so it was the crash came, my father urging me to marry to save my brother from prison, my mother and himself from ruin.

"I yielded, and yet it only made my brother worse to feel that we had been thus saved.

"He drew on me constantly for funds, went to a jeweler's and bought diamonds in my name, and I protected him through all.

"This is a bitter story, Daniel, but I will not shrink from it now.

"At last he got caught in a forgery, went to prison, escaped by taking life and fled to the far West.

"One night he came here just as I was preparing to go to a grand ball in the city.

"He robbed me of my jewels and every dollar I had and escaped.

"The butler was in his pay, so I did not say that it was my brother, and the butler was considered the thief.

"He then told me plainly that he was known as Kit Quantrel, the chief of a band of outlaws whom the miners called the Red Buzzards."

"My God! I can hardly believe it."

"It is true.

"And more, he it was who captured you to force from you the secret of the mine you were going to.

"Your wound destroyed your reason, so you did not know him.

"You were rescued by Red Butterfly and Surgeon Powell, aided by Buffalo Bill and some soldiers.

"Go-won-go brought you East to an asylum, and all believed my brother dead.

"They had all seen Quantrel die, they declared.

"It was then that he reappeared and stole my jewels, using the money to kidnap you from the asylum and take you West.

"He found that you had indeed lost your reason, and he was foiled.

"He took you to an island retreat, and then, being the boldest of bold men, and a ventriloquist, began to hold up stages as Captain Moonlight.

"He would call to his supposed men, and his powers of ventriloquism caused him to give answers which all believed proved others present with him.

"But all this you know, and I recognized him the night he halted the stage in which I was going to my dying husband.

"And yet, when Go-won-go came to the rescue and Sunset Sam would have killed Frank Courtney, I struck up his arm.

"Again Go-won-go rescued you, aided by Surgeon Powell, and they were assured that Captain Moonlight was dead.

"That he was buried in the rocky cavern they were certain, and so, indeed, were all others.

"But, Daniel, he is not dead."

"Not dead?" cried Daniel Darwin, in amazement.

"No, for I have a letter from him.

"He dug his way out after several days of work, and again sought to go upon the trail as a road-agent.

"He tells me frankly that he met an old friend, an outlaw, and joined in with him in a plot to gain gold.

"If it is successful, he will be content and seek another land.

"If it is not successful, then he swears he will come here and force from me a sum sufficient to keep him in a life of luxury.

"Now, Daniel, you know why I do not wish you to go to the frontier.

"He is still hovering around the trails from Dismal City to Fort Venture, he says.

"You must not be killed by Frank Courtney, and you must not kill my brother!"

"Do you understand now why you must not go, for you would be his first game, and it could only end in his death, or yours."

"I understand all now, Lucita, and it must be other hand than mine that takes your brother's life.

"But may I write to Go-won-go at once, and place her upon her guard, telling her that her bitterest foe is yet alive?"

"Yes, write at once," was the earnest response of Lucita Dillingham.

CHAPTER L.

AN INDIAN SPY.

It was the morning after Go-won-go had passed along the Fatal Trail, leaving certain signs upon the rocks here and there, that an Indian horseman came riding out from the cliffs bordering the river and moved across the barren valley.

He was mounted upon a wiry pony, and it could be seen that the hoofs were muffled to leave no trail.

Upon the Indian's feet also were boards, larger somewhat than shingles, and they were fastened to his moccasins.

Did he get down from his pony he would thus leave no tracks, should the earth be soft.

The Indian was a young brave, scarcely over twenty, and yet he wore the head dress of a chief.

He was armed with bow and arrows, a lasso and a revolver in his belt.

Strange to say, too, he carried a field-glass swung to his belt.

He rode directly toward the Fatal Trail and struck it at the very spot where Go-won-go had first dismounted to paint the signs upon the rocks.

A cry broke from his lips as he beheld the sign, a horse in black going at full speed.

"Go-won-go! Go-won-go!" he said, in an excited way, and then he examined the sign thoroughly.

As though understanding it, he mounted his horse and moved away in the direction which Go-won-go had gone.

The trail seemed familiar to him, too, and reaching the steep rocks he dismounted, led his pony up to the bushes, parted them, and went through as the Red Rider had done.

He then found the arrow, painted in red, and he went along at a rapid pace.

Without a break he followed the trail of the Red Butterfly, up the stream and thence on across to the Fatal Trail, where he again studied over the signs painted there on the rocks.

His face wore a pleased look, as though he read that which gave him real pleasure.

Then he meditated for some time, and mounting his pony, went back into the timber near the ridge.

It was night now, and he had been so intent in following the trail of the Red Rider, and reading the painted "signs" on the rocks that he had not halted for rest or food.

But he went into a quiet camp, in a secluded gulch, eating some cold game and apparently content with such a supper.

When the morning came he had breakfast, and then took up a position as though in ambush, not upon the Fatal Trail, but where Go-won-go had paused on his ride to Jumping Off City.

His pony was staked out, where he could not be seen, and hidden by rocks and stunted bushes the Indian waited with the patience of his people, a patience no other race can equal, for the coming of some one he was looking for.

The hours passed away, and at last far off on the trail toward Jumping Off City a horseman came in sight.

As he drew nearer, it was seen to be the Red Butterfly.

He was riding in a canter, and going along

the trail which further on entered the Valley of Death.

But he halted at the spot where he had made the signs on the rocks, smiled as he seemed to recognize some change in what he had painted, and then branched off toward the spur of the ridge where the young Indian chief was in ambush.

The warrior did not move, but kept his eyes upon the coming form.

There was the same satisfied expression upon his face as came there when he discovered the signs, and he bided his time for whatever was before him.

Across the trackless ground went the Pony Rider, and a moment after was in easy range of the Indian in ambush.

But no bullet came flying at a human target, no arrow whizzed toward the Red Rider. Instead the Indian chief gave the plaintive call of the dove seeking its mate.

Instantly Red Butterfly spurred forward, sprung from the saddle and the hands of the two met in a warm clasp.

"Go-won-go!"

"Wep-to-mah."

Such were the names that broke from the lips of the young chief and the Red Rider.

Then in his own tongue the Indian brave talked rapidly, Go-won-go listening with deepest attention.

"Wep-to-mah was on the trail, and saw the signs on the rocks."

"His heart was full of joy, for they told him that Go-won-go was again in the land of the setting sun."

"He came on the trail to meet her, and his eyes are full of sunshine, for she is here, her hand has grasped again the hand of Wep-to-mah."

"Go-won-go is glad to see her old friend again," replied the Indian girl, speaking in the Sioux tongue.

"But why does she find Wep-to-mah again on the red trail?"

"Did he not tell her he would go back to his people and give battle to his foes in the field, and not seek to kill those who ride this trail?"

"Wep-to-mah has not kept faith with Go-won-go."

A pained expression passed over the really fine face of the young Indian, and he said in a low, earnest tone:

"Wep-to-mah meant not to talk to Go-won-go with a crooked tongue."

"He did go from the Red Trail, he and his braves; but the white chief came after them again, and told them how he had met a pale-face brother who would make them all rich."

"My braves said come, and Wep-to-mah yielded to their wish and the words of the white chief."

"And who was this pale-face brother of the white chief of the Trail Assassins, who had vowed to leave the Fatal Trail?"

"It was the wicked white chief of the Wheel Trails, for he did not die as Go-won-go thought."

"My God! that man yet lives!" cried Red Butterfly in her excitement speaking in English.

CHAPTER LI.

GO-WON-GO'S REQUEST.

FOR a long while did Go-won-go remain and talk with the Indian chief, who had admitted that he was one of the band of Unknown Assassins of the Fatal Trail.

A strange influence did the Indian girl have over Wep-to-mah, and whatever point she wished to gain she carried.

She asked him many questions, and at last said:

"Wep-to-mah was always Go-won-go's friend."

"He saved her from the bullets and arrows of her foes."

"He left his warnings for her when danger lurked, and his signs told her which trail to take."

"Now has Go-won-go again come to the land of the setting sun, and Wep-to-mah knows that she is not what she seems, but a woman."

"She is here for a purpose, and Wep-to-mah is her foe if he aids her not, he is her friend if he will help her."

"The Red Butterfly has spoken, and Wep-to-mah has heard."

"What does Wep-to-mah say?"

"The Red Butterfly shall lead Wep-to-mah as she wills."

And the young chief bent his head in token of submission.

Go-won-go placed her hand upon the bowed head for an instant, then said:

"Wep-to-mah has spoken well."

"We are friends."

She held forth her small hand, and the young chief grasped it eagerly.

Then she sprung upon her waiting horse, and, after a word to the young chief, turned back from the spur, riding directly toward the Fatal Trail.

Wep-to-mah watched her from his position, saw her turn into the Fatal Trail, and then mounting his pony rode along on the ridge.

Once in the Fatal Trail, Go-won-go began to move on at a lively pace.

"I will be on time. Poor Velvet Bill was late often, Colonel Seeley said, but had he not been behind, by taking the secret trails, he would have been slain."

"Well, I must hurry on."

It was known in the fort that Go-won-go had decided to remain his off days there, instead of at Dismal City as before, so he was expected to arrive in the afternoon at the hour he had set as his time.

Of course, many were anxious as to whether he would come or not, but others seemed to have an abiding faith that the Red Butterfly was not born to be shot on the Overland Trails.

Still every one was on the *qui vive* for his coming, and when the hour drew near when he should come in sight, if he came at all, all who were not on duty gathered at points of lookout and gazed down the trail, visible for several miles.

The officers, too, felt the same interest, and the ladies and children caught the fever also, and were on the watch from positions of vantage.

Colonel Seeley paced the floor of his quarters, and his face was growing more and more stern.

He seemed to lean upon Surgeon Powell more than any one else in the sorrows that had come upon him, and when nearly time for the Pony Rider to come in sight, sent for that officer.

"Do you not think the Red Butterfly has decided to remain here on his off days, Powell, to search the better for my daughter?"

"It can be his only purpose, sir, in making the change, and we will soon know if he has any news, for I have abiding faith in that young Indian Rider."

"As I have, though he is the devoted friend of Velvet Bill— Oh! what is that?" and as the colonel uttered the words, from without came a chorus of voices:

"There he comes!"

"Why, he is ahead of time, Powell?"

"Yes, sir, ten minutes or more."

"And Velvet Bill was always late."

"He is not the light form for a horse to carry, sir, that Go-won-go is."

"Then, too, the Red Butterfly was often late on his last rides when here before."

"How is it that he and Velvet Bill go through and all others are killed?"

"It is a mystery which they alone seem to know, sir; but Pony Bob says he does not believe the Assassins can kill him now, and as soon as he is able to sit in the saddle he will ride again."

"Yes, but it will be nearly a week before he can."

"I will not dismiss him from my care, sir, for two months yet."

"He had a very close call, Colonel Seeley."

"Yes, and your skill alone saved him—hark! how that fellow rides."

The rapid clatter of hoofs reached their ears now, and a moment after a roar of voices went up as Red Butterfly dashed into the fort, drew rein at the colonel's quarters, threw himself from his saddle, and with his leather pouches over his arm, walked rapidly to report to the commandant.

The colonel greeted him as he entered the door with:

"Well done, my boy."

"You are ahead of time."

"It was easy going, sir."

"And you escaped with your life, so have not forgotten your old tricks of riding Pony Express."

"It is easy enough, Colonel Seeley, if one only knows how to do it," and Go-won-go smiled as though he was not going to tell all he knew.

"Well, have you made any discoveries about—my poor child?"

"Colonel Seeley, you must let Velvet Bill go free, for he can restore her to you and he alone," was the startling response of the Red Butterfly, and the words were uttered more as a demand than as a request, to the great surprise of Surgeon Powell, who glanced quickly at the colonel to note their effect on him.

CHAPTER LII.

RED BUTTERFLY MAKES A DEMAND.

COLONEL SEELEY showed no sign of anger at the almost demand of the Red Butterfly for the release of Velvet Bill, and Surgeon Powell breathed more easily, for he had feared trouble, which might drive the Indian Rider from the trail he was on.

"Go-won-go," said the colonel in his calm way, "you seem as anxious to get Velvet Bill out of the guard-house, as you do to rescue my daughter."

"I know just what I am doing, sir, and I wish you to put confidence enough in me to let me work in my own way."

"I certainly am anxious to do so."

"Yes, but you still keep Velvet Bill a prisoner, when were he free I am sure that your daughter would return here within the week at the very furthest."

"Yet why not if he is not set free?"

"Because he is the one to effect her rescue, sir."

"Why not you?"

"There are certain things that I cannot do, Colonel Seeley, that Velvet Bill can."

"It seems, then, that he does know where my daughter is?"

"I will answer for him that he does know, sir."

The colonel's face darkened, and he said sternly:

"Then he is deceiving me."

"No, yet I cannot explain how he is not; but I wish his aid."

"I am at your service, Red Butterfly," said Surgeon Powell, anxious to avoid an issue between the colonel and the Red Rider, for he saw that the latter was in a mood he had never noticed in him before.

"Surgeon Powell, I know all that you are too well to refuse your aid, did I feel that you could help me."

"But you could no more rescue Miss Seeley than I could."

"But together?"

"We can do nothing, for ail depends upon Velvet Bill."

"This is remarkably strange, that Velvet Bill should be able to rescue my child, yet plainly told me he was not seen with her, denied everything, and now you say, Go-won-go, that he knows just where she is, and this in the face of his denials."

"Colonel Seeley, I cannot explain, sir, nor can Velvet Bill; but if he is free he can act, and act with me."

"Yes, and then I will also seek the aid of Surgeon Powell and one other."

"And that other?"

"Buffalo Bill."

"Yet you, Powell and Cody cannot rescue my daughter together?"

"We cannot, sir."

"One man more makes the difference?"

"Velvet Bill does, sir, for a hundred men could not do what he can in this matter."

"You make a most marvelous hero of him, Go-won-go."

"He is a marvelous man, sir."

"All that you say but convinces me the more that he is playing me false."

"I will not release him."

"Colonel Seeley, if you will release Velvet Bill, I will stand as a hostage in his place," earnestly said Go-won-go.

"He would not come back, and what have I against you, Go-won-go, to hold you as a prisoner?"

"You then refuse my request, sir?"

"I must do so, my young friend, for affairs are so shaping that I am glad I have him here in my power."

"Colonel Seeley, I have requested, urged, and all to no avail."

"Now, by the love you hold for your daughter, I demand that you set Velvet Bill free that he may rescue her."

The colonel's face flushed, and his eyes flashed with anger.

But he said, with an effort to keep down his temper:

"Pony Express Rider Go-won-go, let me say to you that your duties are to ride the trail between Fort Venture and Dismal City, and you will be good enough in future to attend to that business alone," and Colonel Seeley showed that the interview was at an end.

The dark-red face of Go-won-go flushed painfully at this rebuke, but he saluted, turned on his heel and left the room, going at once to his own quarters.

Surgeon Powell was distressed at this turn of affairs.

He saw, or thought he saw, more in the release of Velvet Bill, than merely giving him his freedom.

He knew well how Go-won-go worked, how mysterious were his movements, and yet he wondered why he had not been willing to tell Colonel Seeley just why he wished the gambler set free.

The colonel was angry, that was certain, and that Red Butterfly's words did compromise Velvet Bill the more, there was not the shadow of a doubt.

He had emphatically denied that he had been seen with Alice Seeley, and yet the Indian Rider had said that he knew just where Alice Seeley was to be found, and that he alone could rescue her.

Putting all things together, as he saw them, Frank Powell decided that when Velvet Bill had ridden Pony Express before, in Go-won-go's place, he had fallen in love with Alice Seeley.

From seeing her, as he believed, meet the gambler on the trail, it looked very much as though Alice Seeley had returned his affection with all her heart.

Her mysterious disappearance, carrying her clothes, and the fact that her maid, Valerie, also went along, looked as though the young lady had been willingly kidnapped.

Being seen with the gambler since, and not being the captive of the Indians who were the escort, it looked as though she was willingly in captivity.

The fact that Velvet Bill must be set free to rescue her looked also as though that was to

be the trump card he was to play to win the colonel's consent for him to wed his daughter.

"And Go-won-go is their ally."

"Well, so it all looks to me, but never yet did I bet on what a woman would or would not do, but what I lost."

"I must wait and see this game out before I can understand just what is at the bottom of it all."

And Surgeon Powell sought his quarters to further think over the matter in all its phases.

CHAPTER LIII.

SURGEON POWELL CORNERED.

FRANK POWELL sat in his quarters that night alone, and his mind was still busy trying to arrive at a solution of the mystery between Velvet Bill, Go-won-go and Alice Seeley.

A tap came at the door, and in response to the request to enter, Go-won-go stepped across the threshold.

"Ah, Red Butterfly, glad to see you."

"I was just thinking of you, so take a seat and we'll have a talk together."

"That is what I came for, Surgeon Powell."

"Any ears around?"

"Only my own."

"Sure?"

"I will make assurance doubly sure."

And Frank Powell got up and made the round of his cabin, indoor and out.

"No one about, as I was certain; but why so mysterious, Butterfly?"

"Because I wish to do you no harm."

"Me?"

"Yes; I have come on a special mission to see you, Surgeon Powell."

"I am at your service; but I am very sorry you and the colonel had trouble to-day."

"Doctor Powell, I do not blame Colonel Seeley in the least."

"Both the conduct of Velvet Bill and myself seem contradictory, and the colonel took the stand he deemed right, not knowing what is behind it all, and he is not to be censured."

"But I tried a bluff game on him, to see if I could not make him yield."

"He is not that kind."

"So I felt sure; but still I played it as one of my cards."

"He grew more firm, so I saw I had to give up."

"But I was the more determined to have him set Velvet Bill free, as I did not wish to ask you to do it, if I could avoid it."

"Ask me?"

"Yes, sir."

"To set Velvet Bill free?"

"So I said, sir."

"Why, my dear Red Butterfly, how could I do such a thing?"

"Simply by taking the bit in your teeth."

"I do not catch your meaning."

"Well, to be plain: Velvet Bill has got to be set free, and you must do it."

"Ah, Go-won-go, playing a bluff trump on me now I see," and the doctor laughed.

"No, I am playing something stronger than bluff," was the cool rejoinder.

"What is it?"

"Authority."

"Ah, where is it?"

"Have you forgotten that Colonel Seeley gave you distinct orders to obey me?"

Dr. Powell gave a long whistle.

He realized that he had sprung the trap in which Go-won-go had driven him.

But he laughed and said:

"Well, what are your orders, captain?"

"That you release Velvet Bill secretly from his imprisonment."

"That I cannot do."

"You accepted the situation of the position in which you would be placed in obeying my orders."

"The colonel left it to you, and you decided."

"Not a word was said as to what those orders were, or when they would be issued, so they stand good."

"Not to do a wrong, Go-won-go."

"Nothing was said about right, or wrong."

"Besides, Surgeon Powell, you will be doing right in the end."

"How so?"

"By aiding in the rescue of Miss Seeley."

"I do not see it."

"No, but I do, and would trust my eyesight."

"I must refuse, Go-won-go."

"You cannot refuse."

"See here, Surgeon Powell, you know me as I am, a woman."

"You know how devoted was the friendship between Alice Seeley and myself."

"You have been with me on two trails in search of my adopted father, Daniel Darwin, and to rescue him."

"Did I not win both games then?"

"You did."

"Well, I shall win this, and again I need your aid."

"I came here at the call of Velvet Bill to rescue Miss Seeley, when I never expected again to put my foot in these wild lands."

"I find him a prisoner, and thus he is hampered, as I am also."

"You must trust me."

"You must, though it may appear to others to place you in an ignoble light, so must it be for awhile, for in the end you will come out with flying colors."

"You have orders from the commandant to obey my orders, and my command is for you to release Velvet Bill."

"Could I do so I would not ask you; but it might spoil all to have me make the attempt."

"Now I'll tell you all I wish you to do."

"I will hear you, Go-won-go," said the doctor thoughtfully.

"I wish Velvet Bill set free."

"Once free I will take him out of the fort."

"I wish your aid and Buffalo Bill's."

"You are to go to the colonel and tell him I need the aid of yourself and his chief of scouts."

"Say that we three depart to-night, and the reason is to rescue his daughter."

"Say nothing about Velvet Bill, for he need suspect nothing such as that you are going to obey his orders and mine."

"You and Cody are to leave the fort together, and wait for me at the first grave on the Fatal Trail."

"I will follow with Velvet Bill, and will join you at the spot referred to."

"Then our work begins, and my word for it, Surgeon Powell, that the result will be all that you can hope for, all that will make Colonel Seeley's sad heart glad."

"Now do you trust me?"

"I trust you wholly, Go-won-go, but do you realize what a responsibility I take upon myself in doing as you wish?"

"I know it all; but if you are away, no one knows where, then they will only suspect, not know, you set Velvet Bill free."

"Buffalo Bill will be gone too, and it will not be known just when we are to return."

"But how can it be done?"

"Why go to the guard-house to-night, order the extra soldier on duty there to bring Velvet Bill to your quarters here."

"Then bid the soldier wait outside until you call him."

"You can then go out the rear way alone, join Buffalo Bill and leave the fort, going to the appointed rendezvous."

"I can slip into your quarters, with an officer's cloak and hat, lead Velvet Bill to my quarters, have him mount his own horse, and leave the fort by the other gate, for I have the countersign."

"Once free of the fort I will come to meet you and Buffalo Bill."

"And the soldier guard?"

"Will wait until he grows alarmed, then seek the corporal of the guard, and it will be found that Velvet Bill has made his escape, and you and Buffalo Bill will have been known to go out alone, while a supposed officer passed out with me."

"When you come to explain, Miss Seeley will be with you."

"You pledge this, Go-won-go?"

"I do, upon my honor."

"Then I obey your orders," was the determined response of Surgeon Powell.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE PLOT.

It was a clever scheme, for the escape of Velvet Bill, but Surgeon Powell had his misgivings about it.

Still, there was that in Go-won-go which he could trust, and that good might come of wrong he took the step he did.

He readily obtained leave of Colonel Seeley to go upon a secret expedition.

"Who is going with you, Powell?" asked the colonel.

"Buffalo Bill, sir, and myself are to meet the Red Rider."

"Ah, he is still on the trail, then, to help me?"

"Oh, yes, sir, that is his sole wish, I feel sure."

"I am sorry I could not do as he wished and allow Velvet Bill to go; but, under the circumstances I could do nothing else from my standpoint."

"No, sir," and Surgeon Powell felt a twinge of conscience that he was preparing to deceive his noble commander.

So he left headquarters and went to look up Buffalo Bill, between whom and himself the strongest of friendships existed, and had for years; the scout and the surgeon were, indeed, like brothers in their warm affection for each other.

He found Cody at the scout's headquarters and said:

"I have a plan afoot, Bill, which I wish you to aid me in."

"Then I am the very man you are looking for, Frank. What is the scheme?"

"We are to go on a scout."

"Alone?"

"You and I are to leave alone; but I will tell you more when we are on our way."

"All right. When?"

"To-night."

"I'll be ready."

"Go fully equipped for ten days' stay, and with ammunition in plenty."

"I'll do it."

Then Surgeon Powell went to his own quarters and began his preparations for the trip.

He got all ready and looked in on Pony Bob, whom he had located in a cabin adjoining his own.

The Pony Rider was accepting his situation with the resignation of an Indian.

"You are better, Bob, and steadily improving."

"That's what I feel, sir, and I'll be ready for the rides again in a few weeks."

"I hope so, but you must go slow now, no matter how fast you go after you get well."

"I am going away for a few days, but, Surgeon Enslow will look after you."

"All right, sir, and I hope you can bring back some news of that poor young lady, for that is what you are going for, I am sure."

"Something of that kind, Bob. Good-by!"

and the surgeon returned to his rooms, drew the curtains close, unlocked the rear door and walked over to the guard-house.

"Sergeant, send that prisoner with a couple of soldiers to my rooms quietly. I wish to see him alone."

"Yes, sir," and the order was obeyed, as the sergeant never for a moment thought of doubting an officer of Colonel Seeley's staff.

"Come in," said Dr. Powell, to the knock of the soldiers at the door.

They brought in their prisoner, and Surgeon Powell said:

"Wait outside, men, and I'll be responsible for him."

"Yes, sir."

"You will have to wait a long while."

The men saluted and stepped outside of the door, taking seats on a bench near by.

"Velvet Bill, do you see that door?" asked the surgeon, pointing to the one in the rear of his cabin.

"I do, sir."

"Pass out of it and you will be met by one whose orders you are to obey."

Velvet Bill started, smiled, and with a salute obeyed.

As he went out of the rear door there stood Go-won-go!

"Come, Bill, there is no time to lose. Put your long hair up under this officer's hat, throw this cloak over your shoulders and come on."

"Go-won-go!"

"Sh!—talk after awhile; silence now!" and Go-won-go led the way to his quarters.

Two horses were there, saddled and equipped, and silently they mounted and rode away in the darkness toward the western stockade gate, where there was only one sentinel stationed.

As they approached, the sentinel halted them, Go-won-go dismounted, advanced and gave the countersign.

By a strange coincidence, the countersign for the night was "Red Butterfly."

The sentinel presented arms to the one he deemed an officer, and the two rode out of the stockade gate upon the prairie.

They were not long in placing considerable distance between themselves and the fort.

"Well, Go-won-go, I am happy in the inmost depths of my heart to meet you again," said the gambler.

"You asked me to come."

"And you did. I knew that you would. And you have freed me from prison."

"It was by Surgeon Powell's aid, for I pledged him that you and I together would rescue Miss Seeley."

"Yes."

"And so he did what he considered wrong to gain that end."

"Yes."

"Now let me tell you that I have seen Wep-to-wah."

"Your Indian friend?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"It is for you alone to act, you alone to save Miss Seeley."

"We can work together, Go-won-go, only I must go alone."

"Yes, but I have two strong allies to aid me."

"Who?"

"Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill."

"Good! Where are they?"

"Waiting at the nearest grove on the trail to the fort."

"That is right, and there you go."

"And you?"

"I leave you before we reach the rendezvous where the others wait," was the reply.

CHAPTER LV.

A SURPRISE.

SURGEON POWELL and Buffalo Bill reached the rendezvous appointed by Go-won-go, and staking out their horses, sat down to await the coming of the Indian Rider and Velvet Bill.

"Well, Frank, I have about the same faith in Go-won-go and Velvet Bill that you have, and if they fail us in this, I'll find it hard to trust in human nature again," remarked Buffalo Bill, as the two sat talking together.

"As I will, Bill; but do you know that for the life of me I cannot make out the situation. Is it a case of love between Velvet Bill and Miss Seeley, or not?"

"It very much looks like a love affair between them, and if so, from all you told me, Go-won-go and Velvet Bill are playing some deep game to accomplish the end they have in view."

"So it appears."

"But there is no knowing just what a woman will do, for there are a hundred men from captains to generals in the army, any one of whom Miss Seeley could get and thank you for the taking, and yet here she skips off with a gambler of the mines."

"He's awful good-looking, Bill."

"Granted, and has as fine a form as ever I beheld."

"Then, too, he is a gentleman, and has pluck enough for a whole regiment; but after all he is Velvet Bill."

"True."

"And who knows his other name?"

"No one that I have met."

"I am simply Buffalo Bill, but they do know that I am William F. Cody, Government scout, that I have not skipped West for the good of the community I left behind; but here is this dashing, daring, devilishly handsome fellow, who calls himself only Velvet Bill and says he gambles for a living, a man who has a snug little graveyard all his own, though I admit he never kills unless he has to, and here he comes and runs off with the handsomest girl I ever set my eyes on, Frank."

"I tell you, women are harder to understand than Indians."

"We are unanimous on that, Bill; but here they come."

"Yes; I hear hoof-falls—but only one horse, Frank."

"Could he have failed to get him out after all?"

"It looks that way."

Just then the form of a horse and rider came into sight, and, as he drew near, Frank Powell called out:

"Go-won-go!"

"The Surgeon Scout," was the reply.

As the Indian Rider rode nearer, both men asked, quickly:

"Did he get out?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to rescue Miss Seeley."

"You let him go?"

And the surgeon spoke in a reproachful tone.

"Oh, yes, for I wished him to go."

"Go-won-go, you are not playing a double game with me?" sternly said Surgeon Powell.

"I am not, sir."

"What does it mean that Velvet Bill did not come here with you?"

"I told Colonel Seeley, sir, in your presence, that Velvet Bill alone could save Miss Seeley."

"I aided him to escape, through your kindness and trust in me, for that purpose, and he has now gone on the duty he left the fort for, while I came here to join you."

"But what can we do, kept in the dark as to the situation?"

"You can follow me to a place where I expect to meet an ally of mine."

"He will come to-morrow to a certain spot, and then we will know what to do."

"Should he not come?"

"But he will."

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, he should not?"

"Then, Surgeon Powell, Velvet Bill will be there."

"Ah!"

"Will you still trust me?"

"Assuredly."

"And you, Mr. Cody?"

"To the end, Red Butterfly; but we are playing a game without a single trump, not knowing just what we are to do."

"I will tell you at the proper time," was Go-won-go's complacent response.

And he led the way over toward the side which he had taken on his last ride, the surgeon and the scout mounting and following him, and both greatly surprised at the non-appearance of Velvet Bill.

CHAPTER LVI.

COMANCHE INDITES A LETTER.

WHEN the Red Butterfly went through to Dismal City, on his first ride in the place of Velvet Bill, the mail-pouch he carried held a letter mailed at Miner's Roost, a couple of hours after the capture of Terror Tom by Comanche.

The letter was addressed in a hand that looked like a drunkard's trail, to

"TERRER DICK & HARY,
Dismal City."

The spelling of this letter Terror Tom was responsible for, but it was dictated by Comanche, his Indian captor.

It was no easy task to make one who was a stranger to a pen write a letter; but Comanche used powers of persuasion that were not to be ignored.

He came in to where his prisoner was, unchained him, took the manacle off his right wrist, and made him sit down at a table.

Then he placed before him a piece of paper, an envelope and a pen and ink.

"Make paper talk," he suggested.

"Does yer mean I am to write something?"

"Yes."

"I can't do it."

"Write quick, Tom," and the Indian grasped the long hair of the desperado with one hand, while he touched the keen blade of his knife to the scalp with the other.

"What in thunder am I to write?" cried the terrified Terror.

"Me tell Tom."

"Sail in, then, fer I don't like this fix."

"Tom tell Dick and Harry to come here."

"He want see them quick!"

"You're a liar, I don't!"

"You tell me scalp."

"I'll do it."

So Terror Tom began his letter, and Comanche said:

"Me get landlord to read see if paper talk straight."

Terror Tom uttered an oath, for he was headed off there.

"Tell Dick and Harry come."

"Meet you old cabin on cliff."

"What for?"

"Me want, that all."

"Oh, Injun! Injun! when I do get ther draw on you, then you will sing your death-song."

"Make paper talk, not you," and the keen edge of the knife was pressed against the scalp.

Then Terror Tom did what no other style of urging could make him do, wrote a letter.

It struck him that after all he would be glad to have his two pards with him, for Comanche certainly could not master the three of them.

So he wrote what the Indian told him to, and Comanche said:

"Now go see if Tom talk straight."

He seemed to read in the face of the desperado that he had only written what he was told to, and again putting the chains on him, left the cabin, and the letter went to Dismal City, carried by Go-won-go.

The next day the miners saw Comanche about his work as usual, and he was eagerly questioned as to what he had done with Terror Tom.

But he seemed not to understand the questions, or at least made no replies to them.

That night he asked a coach stable-boy to look after his horses for him, locked up the cabin, and with Terror Tom mounted upon his own horse, he riding Velvet Bill's, he rode away from the camps.

He made his way up in the mountains to a spur, upon which stood a deserted cabin.

A grand view was visible from there, and yet the Indian took his prisoner inside and again chained him securely.

That night two men rode up to the cabin and are hailed.

The Indian answered, and opened the door for them to come in.

What struck them they did not know, but they went flying over into one corner half-stunned, and found themselves covered by a couple of revolvers held in the hands of Comanche.

They were the rest of the trio, Terrors Dick and Harry.

Resistance was useless, so they surrendered, for the blows they had received had dazed them.

Five minutes after entering the cabin the two were in irons and scowling at Terror Tom, who they believed had purposely led them into a trap.

But Tom explained all that had happened in his quiet way, adding:

"Now when I know'd thet one Injun were a-goin' ter bring me up here, and invite you ter come, says I, we has him; but we hain't got him."

"He hev got us; but what fer?" growled Dick, with commendable curiosity upon the subject.

"I dunno."

"I'll ask him," Harry remarked, and so he said:

"See here, Injun, what is yer goin' ter do with us?"

"Kill," was the laconic response, and it satisfied the curiosity of the trio.

Having made his men secure, Comanche went out and saddled his horse and Terror Tom's.

Then he led his prisoners out one by one, aided them to mount, tied them to their horses, and mounting his own, and holding the lariat of the other animals, rode away down the steep mountain trail.

Once at the bottom he turned off on the Fatal Trail.

CHAPTER LVII.

AN APPOINTMENT KEPT.

WHEN Red Butterfly led the way toward the ridge, Buffalo Bill said:

"We cannot go this way, Go-won-go."

"Yes, I will show you a trail."

"Then you will show me what we have all

been wanting to find for a long while," was the answer.

Arriving at the base of the ridge the Indian Rider dismounted, motioned to the others to follow his example, and led his horse up to the bushes and through them into the trail beyond.

"Well, Go-won-go, you can teach me a great deal, I admit," said the scout, while Surgeon Powell added:

"Yes, I have learned a great deal from Red Rider."

"You'll learn more before we get to the end of the trail we left the fort to follow," said the Indian Rider.

Leading the way along the ridge trail, now lighted up by the rising moon, Go-won-go did not halt until he came to his former camping-ground.

"You will be safe here," he said with perfect confidence, and then set to work to stake out his horse near by, and to spread his blankets.

The others followed his example, and the scout asked:

"No need of a guard?"

"None."

"Might we not be surprised?"

"But three persons know this trail, or did before I let you into the secret."

"One of these I expect here to-morrow, and the other is Velvet Bill."

"Aha! and if I mistake not, this trail can be taken instead of the one through Death Valley?"

"Exactly, Mr. Cody, and that is all that has saved my life and Velvet Bill's in riding Pony Express."

Both the surgeon and the scout gave a low whistle.

"You see, I am letting you into the secret now, for this is not the only trail that can be taken, in spite of your search for them, and never having been able to track the Assassins."

"They are longer, of course, and put us behind time often, for we have to watch our chances to take them, so as not to betray the secret."

"But you see now how it is that Velvet Bill and myself bear charmed lives."

"Whose racket is it, Go-won-go?" asked Cody.

"The secret was given me by one whom you will see to-morrow, one who has been my friend from early childhood."

"But you'll find out in good time, so I'll tell you no more."

With this, Go-won-go went over to the place where he had spread his blankets, and the surgeon and the scout sat talking together in a low tone.

"We are catching on in great shape, Frank."

"Yes, Bill, and I only hope we'll catch on to Velvet Bill again; but let us go to bed and get what rest we can, for there is no telling what is before us, and Go-won-go has set a good example."

So they also turned in, and the day had dawned ere they awoke.

They had breakfast, and then lounged about for several hours, when Buffalo Bill suddenly sprang for his rifle, but it was grasped by Go-won-go, who said, sternly:

"No; that is my friend."

"An Indian?"

"Yes."

"He comes along mighty brash."

"Yes; he knows I am here, for I gave him a signal to come."

"Well, Go-won-go, you are running the layout, so it is all right."

And the scout gazed with interest upon the horseman coming toward them.

It was Wep-to-mah, and his smile at seeing Go-won-go caused Buffalo Bill to mutter to Frank:

"Yes; here's another case of love-gone-mad."

"He's a Sioux."

"Yes; and a chief, though he is a young one."

Wep-to-mah now dismounted from his pony and grasped Go-won-go's hand, while he seemed to ignore the existence of the others.

"My friend Wep-to-mah, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill."

"He speaks English well, though you speak his tongue, both of you, I believe."

Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon Scout both stepped forward and shook hands with the young Sioux chief, who now gazed at them with considerable interest, knowing who they were, the greatest enemies of his race, and whom, to kill, would have made a young brave the greatest chief of his tribe.

After a few words had been said in a friendly way between the two pale-faces and the Indian chief, Go-won-go called the young chief apart, and the two entered into a very earnest conversation.

"He's one of the Secret Assassins, Frank, I'll wager my horse on it."

"Yes, Bill, I think he is; but Go-won-go has won him over, that is certain."

"I'd like to know what they are talking about."

"We will know in good time."

"I am getting more convinced that we are on the right trail following Go-won-go's lead, and

in good time she will take us into her confidence; but see, something has gone wrong, for look at her eyes blaze as she talks to the Indian chief."

"Maybe she's jealous."

"Bah! he loves her, but she does not care for him."

"Frank Powell, you don't know any more about a woman than I do."

"Granted! what man does?" and Frank Powell laughed.

In the mean time Go-won-go was talking in a low, earnest tone to the Indian chief, and in the Sioux tongue.

He seemed impressed by what he said, for he nodded his head, held forth his hand, and turning on his heel, sprung upon his waiting pony and rode away at a rapid pace.

"Well!" said Powell.

"Well!" echoed Cody.

"This is more than fighting the devil without fire, for he don't seem to be in this little game."

"Here she comes," said Frank Powell, and Go-won-go came toward them.

"I have heard news I did not expect, my friends, and so we must mount and be on the trail, for we are needed."

"Where?"

"Velvet Bill wants us."

"Ah! you have a message from him?"

"No, sir, I have not; but Wep-to-mah told me that which will make it necessary to start at once, for we have a long ride before us, and some work to do after we get to our journey's end."

"Where has the Indian chief gone?"

"I sent him on a mission which he will perform."

"You are sure?"

"I will stake my life on it," was the determined response.

Then Go-won-go said:

"Come, we must be off," and ten minutes after the surgeon and the scout were following her along the secret trail in the direction of Jumping Off City.

CHAPTER LVIII.

A SECRET OF THE FATAL TRAIL.

THE surprise of Powell and Cody, at the manner in which they discovered trails, under the guidance of the Red Butterfly, where they had never believed such existed, was openly expressed to the Red Rider, with considerable praise for his knowledge thrown in.

The trail down the spur was taken, into the brook, along its bed for several miles, and then out where no iron-shod hoof would leave a track, from there on to the Fatal Trail.

As they reached the latter, there suddenly emerged from behind a pile of rocks four horsemen.

The trio were on their guard in an instant, for they knew that where they had not seen the horsemen they had been seen, and the others had gone into hiding.

But there was no need of standing at bay, for Go-won-go recognized at a glance Comanche, the Indian pard of Velvet Bill, and those with him were seen to be white men, and harmless.

They were, in fact, the trio of Terrors, om, Dick and Harry.

They were in irons still and bound to their horses, while Comanche had their lariats wound about the horn of his saddle.

"Me see you 'way off."

"Don't know, so hide."

"Me know now, Go-won-go, Buffalo Bill, White Medicine Chief," said Comanche, rather pleased that he did not have to make a run of it or a fight to save his prisoners.

"Well, Comanche, you have got the devil's whole outfit," said Buffalo Bill, as he gazed upon the cruel faces of the Three Terrors.

"Bad medicine, goin' to kill."

"What, they were going to kill you?"

"No, me kill."

"Oh! but what kind of a trap did you set to catch the whole flock at once?" and Buffalo Bill laughed.

"He played a false card on us, pard, and bein' as we is honest men, I supposes you'll let us go," said Dick.

"My beloved friend, I never meddle with another man's business," Buffalo Bill responded, while Surgeon Powell sat in silence, viewing the three desperadoes.

"That officer knows me, fer I were at ther fort, and you does, too, Red Rider, so I vouches for my pards here, and will feel obleeged ef yer'll jist let us go."

"What did you bag them for, Comanche?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"Bad pale-face, me know—Velvet Bill know."

"Velvet Bill say kill when I get to fort with them."

"Ah! you are on your way to the fort?" said Go-won-go.

"Me go, see you, think you was bad men, so hide."

"Go now to fort and Velvet Bill."

"See here, Comanche, Velvet Bill is not at the fort, for I left there with him last night."

"But we are going to him now, and we need you, only you have those three men with you."

"Oh, don't let us detain yer, pard, fer we kin go back," said Tom.

"No go—me kill," and Comanche drew his revolver and silenced all other argument with the prisoners.

Go-won-go then said:

"Comanche is a most valuable man to take with us, for he will increase our force to five."

"Four."

"No, Mr. Cody, there is another I am depending upon."

"Ah! I'll fix those fellows."

"Want kill 'em?" coolly asked Comanche.

"No, but come, and I'll show you where they will be safe and it is right on our way," and he led the way toward the Fatal Trail, now going toward Fort Venture, the others following.

It was now getting dark, but Go-won-go held back until night fell, just as they reached the entrance to the Death Valley.

A ride of several miles and a large rock towered up before them.

"There's where I saw the Ghosts of the Trail, and the mystery I could never clear up, for the phantoms disappeared in a way that none of us could understand," said Buffalo Bill, pointing to the large rock, which rose like a giant sentinel on one side of the trail.

It was there too that the Secret Assassins had ambushed several of the Pony Riders in the past, and their graves were near the rock.

"That is where we halt, for I will leave the prisoners here," said Go-won-go.

Neither the scout nor Frank Powell asked any questions, but waited.

They saw Go-won-go take his lariat from his saddle and swinging the coil around his head launch it for the top of the rock.

It caught on a ragged point, and as easily as a sailor could, the Red Rider ran up to the top.

"Come up, Comanche," he said.

The Indian dextrously threw his lasso and twisting the two together, to retain his greater weight went to the top of the rock.

"Ugh!" he said as he saw that the rock was hollow in the center, like a deep well.

"Tie one of those men to the lasso, Mr. Cody, and we will haul them up, for this is the place to leave them."

"They'll never get out without help, in irons as they are."

Terror Tom resisted, but in the strong grasp of Buffalo Bill and the surgeon, he was made fast to the lariat and hauled up.

The others followed, and then Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell in their curiosity went up to see what the discovery was.

There was a rude ladder leading down into the well-like space, and every indication that the interior of the rock was kept as a camp and hiding-place.

"How did you get on to this, Go-won-go?"

"Oh, it's a secret of the Fatal Trail Wep-to-mah made known to me."

"Now, put these men in there, and they'll remain until we send for them."

"I rather guess they will," and Buffalo Bill and Comanche lowered the three prisoners to the bottom of the hollow rock.

"Now, we must push on," said Go-won-go, and arranging the lassoes to slip off when they had reached the ground, they all slipped down them, mounted their horses and rode away, Go-won-go leading directly away from the Fatal Trail while Terror Tom said sorrowfully:

"Pards, we is left here ter die."

CHAPTER LIX.

A DISCLOSURE.

WHEN Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell saw the secret trails, the hollow rock, and other things which Go-won-go opened their eyes to, they were not surprised that the Secret Assassins had so long and well hidden their identity and defied all pursuit.

The nature of the ground was in their favor in every way, and muffled hoofs and boards for the feet of the men, was the order when no trails were to be made.

Leaving the scout, the surgeon and Comanche under the leadership of the Red Butterfly, going, they knew not where, I will transport my reader to the real retreat of the Secret Assassins of the Fatal Trail.

It will be remembered that a party leaving the fort had gone down the river by boat, and had gotten to the cliffs above by a platform which was lowered and raised by a windlass from above.

Once upon what appeared to be a desolate rock, which only a bird could reach, it was by no means such a barren spot as one would suppose.

There was a space on top several acres in size, rugged, broken by canyons and fissures, but for all that, area enough to camp a cavalry regiment, and far down in the canyon were half a hundred horses visible, though how they got there was a mystery except to those who knew the secret.

There was grass too in abundance on the sides, and flats, for the interior of this castle of rocks was very fertile.

Instead of cabins, for there was a scarcity of wood, tents were seen here and there, a dozen in number.

In front of one of these, in a camp-chair, sat one who is known to the reader, for it was none other than Alice Seeley.

Her face was pale but there was a determined look about her mouth as though she was in a defiant mood.

The tent was a pleasant one, with a reed mat upon the floor, a rude table, some books, and some clothing hanging against one wall of the canvas.

Another tent of equal size was not far distant, and the others were down the canyon not far from the horses.

In the other tent sat a woman engaged in arranging a riding-hat to suit her fancy.

It was Valerie Wambold, the maid of Alice Seeley.

She too wore a determined look upon her really very handsome face.

Lying on a blanket beyond the tent in which sat Valerie Wambold, was a man whom the reader last saw struggling for life in the cavern on the little island, and who had at last made his escape by crawling through the aperture, which only the hardest task had made large enough for him to escape that way.

It was Frank Courtney, alias Kit Quantrel, the Outlaw Chief, alias Captain Moonlight.

He had made his escape from what had seemed certain death, and, moneyless, wretched and a hunted man, was tramping along a mountain trail, when suddenly he was held up by three men.

"Courtney, is it you?" cried one of them.

"Yes; you are Ned Wolverton, who was in prison with me under life sentence."

"The same; but I escaped through your act, and I feel like a brother to you."

"What are you doing?"

"I am supposed to be doubly dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes; you have heard of Quantrel?"

"I have, often, and wanted to throw my lot with him until I struck a better trail."

"I was Quantrel."

"No!"

"I was supposed to be killed, and then I came out as Captain Moonlight."

"The deuce!"

"Again I was supposed to have been killed, but I saved myself from death, and now am but a penniless tramp."

"You are a brick, and what say you to linking fortunes with me?"

"Good! What are you doing?"

"I was chief of the Secret Assassins of the Fatal Trail, but was persuaded to give up the work."

"Come, I was just on my way to join that band, and together we can make a fortune, for I have a great scheme in my head to work out."

"I am with you, old pard of my prison days, for, with one like you to aid me, I can go back to the Fatal Trail business again."

"So come! I will send one of my men here to overtake my Indian allies and bring them back again, for it is safer and better to work with red skins."

"I believe you are right, and I am with you, Wolverton; there's my hand upon it."

And upon this compact being formed, the two men started upon the back trail to the retreat of the Secret Ambushers, the hiding-place just revealed to the reader.

CHAPTER LX.

TWO PALS.

WHATEVER motive, or influence it had been, which made Ned Wolverton give up his red work as chief of the Assassins of the Fatal Trail, his meeting with his old pal, Frank Courtney was too much for him, and he readily went back to continue his cruel career against the Pony Riders.

He led the way back to his retreat, sent one of the two white men with him after the Indians who had been his allies, and the two sat down to have a long talk over the situation.

"You see, it must be thought that it is some one else, not me, pard, that is doing the devilry now."

"I've got the grit, and with your help we can do well."

"But what is your idea, Courtney, for I was giving up a pretty nice thing to turn back."

"Worth much?"

"Well, you see my father married a second time, and he left a young and beautiful widow a very large fortune, so I intended going to claim a share of it as hush money, pretending my mother was yet alive—see?"

"Yes, and she'd be glad to fork out liberally to keep you quiet, and I'll play the same game on my sister, whose husband was killed here on Sunset Sam's coach, and left her a great fortune."

"I'll tell her I've found that old Dillingham has another wife living."

"Did you say Dillingham?"

"I did."

"The man who was shot on Sunset Sam's coach by road-agents, and died at Miner's Roost?"

"The same."

"Why, Courtney, we are kin, for Dillingham was my father, and he married your sister."

"We'll go pards on the game we play on the widow."

"Yes, I guess we'll have to; but now let me tell you my racket."

"Good!"

"Colonel Seeley at Fort Venture has a very beautiful daughter."

"Yes, I know he has."

"She is rich from money left her by her mother, and her father is a rich man; but besides, I happen to know, which she does not, that she is the heiress to an enormous estate."

"You see, I had a lawyer chum, and I copied some papers for him, but she was not to know about this bonanza until she reached the age of twenty."

"How old is she now?"

"Nineteen."

"Now I would have liked to have married her myself, but the fact is I got entrapped into a matrimonial alliance, and my wife is at present her maid."

"I see."

"She goes by her maiden name at the fort, Valerie Wambold, and no one knows she was ever married."

"She was a sergeant's daughter, whom the colonel had executed for some crime, and Valerie left me to live with Miss Seeley, to be avenged for her father's death."

"Now I know her game, and she is therefore in my power."

"I'll drop her a line, telling her just what I wish to do, and she'll help me out for the sake of revenge and a fair share of gold which we may get."

"But where is the gold to be gotten?"

"I tell you that she is rich."

"Yes."

"Her father is rich."

"I see."

"She is an only child."

"Well?"

"Consequently heiress to all."

"I understand."

"Then, in less than a year, she is to drop into this big inheritance from an old bachelor great-uncle."

"Yes, but it is all for her."

"And her husband?"

"Is she married?"

"No, but she must be."

"You have got me all mixed up, Courtney."

"Well, I'll explain."

"I'll write my wife, who understands well a cipher alphabet I taught her."

"I'll tell her to arrange, on certain conditions, a plan by which we can kidnap the young heiress."

"I see, and get a ransom."

"Better than that."

"How?"

"How stupid you are!"

"I admit it, that I cannot see through your plot."

"You are a very handsome man, Wolverton."

"Thanks."

"Dressed up in a certain way, you would make an impression."

"I have made too many for my own good, I fear."

"Now when she is kidnapped, the price of her freedom shall be to marry you."

"The devil!"

"No, she's an angel from all accounts."

"What a great head you have got."

"Well, you must play repentant, the ardent lover, that you cannot live without her, and all that, you know, which you have doubtless played often enough to know well how."

"If you can excite her sympathy, all will be well, and if not she must marry you."

"If she will be content to return to the fort with you, for you will never be suspected of being what you really are, and call it a sudden love-affair, a runaway-match, asking papa's forgiveness, well and good."

"If not, you must make her obey your bidding, write a letter from her to the colonel, telling him she has run away and having married one she loves, but unworthy, she intends to reform him, snatch him like a brand from the burning, you know, and will never see his face again."

"Then, you see, when she dies of a broken heart, you get all the fortune and divide with me and my sweet wife, Valerie."

"You are a genius, Courtney, and I am your man to command at once, so we will carry out this plot."

"Well, I'll write Valerie at once and send the letter through, and I'll appoint a place where I can see her if she will come out alone."

"Then we can arrange a kidnapping plot, bring the girl here and, that all may be regular, I'll find a parson somewhere to tie the knot."

"Now, you understand fully?"

"I do."

"And we can make a show on the Fatal Trail, too, for there is money in that at times."

"Yes, I have often struck it rich."

"But, Courtney?"

"Yes."

"Will your wife enter into this plot?"

"I tell you she will do anything for gold and revenge," was the decided answer.

CHAPTER LXI.

IN A NEW ROLE.

THE conversation in the preceding chapter between the two fiends in human form, men of fine appearance and handsome faces, but the blackest of hearts, gives an insight into the well-laid plot to kidnap from her father's protection Alice Seeley.

The letter written was by Frank Courtney to his wife, Valerie, and several meetings were held between the two, while Wolverton also met the traitress, and found that she entered into the plot with really a fiendish pleasure.

She was of a selfish, envious nature, as well as revengeful, and she hated Alice for her greater beauty, her superior education and accomplishments, and her position in society.

She hated her also that she had been born to wealth.

Then, too, she was revengeful toward Colonel Seeley for her father's death, without analyzing the whole affair and seeing that the commander was not to blame.

She had accepted her education and living from his hands, pretended to be a devoted friend, and, going off to teach in a New Mexican family, had met Frank Courtney, even then an outlaw, and married him.

She had believed him a very wealthy ranchero, and he supposed her to be an heiress, and thus each got deceived.

He realized all that she was, and did not deny all that he was himself.

At last she determined to leave him, and so wrote a letter to Colonel Seeley asking him to get her a place as lady's maid.

Thus it was that Valerie Wambold Courtney became the maid and trusted companion of Alice Seeley, who was really very fond of her, never suspecting her loyalty to her.

With a wicked woman her trusted friend, and two evil, merciless men plotting against her, Alice Seeley fell into the trap set for her.

The two men came down the river in their canvas boat, guided by two Indians, who swam alongside, and one in an officer's cloak and hat went up to the colonel's quarters through the rain.

Valerie had done her work well, for both the colonel and Alice had been kept under the influence of chloroform, while the traitress laid her plans to carry with her all that was needed.

There sat poor Alice, drugged, she not having even retired, having fallen asleep in her chair, and while Courtney raised her in his arms, and wrapping blankets around her, carried her from the cabin, the woman followed with a large bundle of clothing.

The next morning Alice Seeley awoke to consciousness with an aching head, and beheld herself amid strange surroundings.

Valerie was seated by her side pretending to weep, and Alice saw that they were in a tent, and the scenery without was all strange.

Quickly she sprung to her feet, and then was told that they had been kidnapped by the Secret Assassins, and would be kept captives until a certain ransom was paid.

At once did Alice offer to pay it, but she was put off with one excuse and another for days, the man Courtney telling her that there was one who would have the bargain to make.

"Who is he?" asked Alice.

"He is one whom luck went against, who was going to lead an evil life until he saw you."

"From that day he changed his career, and he is to give me my ransom for you, while he will claim his ransom from you."

"I care not, so that he lets me know the sum at once."

"I will send him to you," said Courtney.

"He has not dared face you before, but he will come now."

"And you must see him alone, so come, young woman."

"No, I wish Valerie to remain with me."

"He will only see you alone, Miss Seeley," said Courtney.

"Very well, send him here, for I wish the matter ended, as we have been here days now."

Courtney went away, the woman following him, for not yet had the traitress cast off her mask of seeming good.

Then, after they had gone down into the canyon a man came into sight. He was walking slowly toward the tent where Alice sat.

A tall form, broad shoulders, elegant carriage, a velvet coat, spotless buckskin leggings, a broad sombrero, long blonde hair and mustache was what Alice saw, and she sprung to her feet crying:

"You are Velvet Bill! You have come to rescue me!"

CHAPTER LXII.

HIS DOUBLE.

THE scene that followed beggars description, for Alice had believed that the daring, handsome gambler had tracked her kidnappers to their lair.

But the awakening soon came when he told her that he loved her with all his heart and

soul—that he had vowed to utterly reform his life and live for her alone.

He implored her to listen to his story of love, and—she scorned him!

So terrible was her sarcasm and anger that at last he grew enraged and said savagely:

"You were brought here to become my wife, Alice Seeley, and my wife you shall become. I will break that haughty spirit of yours, and if you will not willingly marry me, then I shall force you to do so, forge a letter as from you to your father telling him you have married Velvet Bill, the gambler, and gone your own way."

"If, on the other hand, you will wed me, we will go to your father and ask forgiveness, and I will devote my whole life to making you happy. So, what is your answer, Miss Seeley?"

"That I would leap from yonder cliff before I would descend so low, sir."

"That is your answer?"

"It is."

"I can afford to be generous and give you more time, for we have plenty of it on our hands now."

"I say never, sir! Now go and bid my maid come to me, that I may tell her of your perfidy."

"Your maid? Ha! ha! why, she was the wife of my friend Courtney, who kidnapped you, long before she accepted her position in your service."

"It is false!"

"Is it? Well, all I can say is that she hates your father, hates you, and has sought revenge, which she now has, for she chloroformed your father and yourself, so that you could be brought away from the fort."

"I tell you, Alice, I am the only friend you have here," and the man turned and walked away.

"Oh, dear Heaven! That man fallen so low! I have no hope—yes, I will defy them all!"

"But, can he have told the truth about Valerie?"

"He did; and now you know me as I am."

And the wicked woman came into view around the tent.

"Alas! your own lips have said that which from no others would I believe of you. Now keep aloof from me!"

And the guilty woman fairly shrunk from the withering look bent upon her by the brave girl.

From that day the plotters began to force the prisoner to their terms. Dressed in the riding-habit and hat of Alice Seeley, the wicked woman would ride out with an Indian guard and meet the fiend in human form who was trying to bring Alice to his terms, and this was one to show to any scouts who might be near that which would compromise the maiden and make it be thought that she had really run off with the gambler.

So time passed on, until one day the outlaw chief walked up to the tent and said:

"I gave you until to-day to decide. What is your answer?"

"I will die first!"

"Well, I shall send a man out on the Overland Trail to find a parson and bring him along to unite us. When he comes, you become my wife, and—"

A wild cry came from the lips of Alice which caused the man to look around suddenly.

What he saw blanched his face and brought a cry of horror, the words following:

"Will! You here?"

"Yes; I am here, and it seems that I am needed just at this moment. Have no fear now, Miss Seeley, for you are under the guardianship of Velvet Bill, whom my twin-brother there has been impersonating, to your sorrow and mine."

"Thank God that you are not what he has made me deem you. But, what a resemblance!"

"In face, yes, now that he has shaved off his long beard; and in form, too, as he has adopted my style of dress."

The man known as Ned Wolverton laughed wickedly now, for he began to recover from the shock of his brother's unexpected appearance.

"How did you get here, sir?" he demanded.

"I trailed you, and, since you have broken faith with me, since you have been guilty of the crime you have committed against this lady, I will show you no mercy."

"This man, Miss Seeley, is the chief of the Secret Assassins, and is as merciless as a serpent. I found him out, and he pledged me that he would give up this life, for I then had, and have now, the power to arrest him and take him to the gallows, as he well knows."

"I spared him because we were twin brothers, because he pledged himself to go far away, and break up his band of cut-throats."

"I pitied him because he inherited the evil in him—God forgive me that I have to say so—from our mother."

"Thank God, I was like my noble father, whom our mother deceived and deserted."

"She brought us up to a life of evil, until I was old enough to fly from her and seek my own path, my own fortune in life."

"He remained with her until she died, and left him her curses."

"Such is our story; and now, Ned Wolver-

ton, for you took your mother's name to stain your infamous career, you are my prisoner," and Velvet Bill covered the heart of his twin brother as quick as a flash of lightning.

CHAPTER LXIII.

IN TIME.

Go-won-go led his party on across the Death Valley, in the night seeking no trail, and about midnight came to a pile of rocks, a couple of miles distant from the towering cliffs, overhanging the river and known as the Castle.

"We can hide our horses here, muzzling their noses and muffling their hoofs so that they must keep quiet," explained Go-won-go.

Then on foot the four went their way and arrived at the base of the cliffs just before dawn.

"He is not here, so we must hide and wait."

"Who?"

"Wep-to-mah."

They sought refuge in a secure place among the rocks, and soon the sun rose, yet Go-won-go made no move.

Several hours passed and at last Go-won-go said:

"See there!"

The river made a curve in toward the cliff, and in what appeared to be solid rock an opening was visible.

It was a piece of canvas skillfully painted and set in the mouth of a cavern on a frame to fit it well.

This screen was opened by Wep-to-mah, and he beckoned to Go-won-go.

"Come!"

All hastened around the ledge overhanging the water, reached the cavern and entered.

Then said Wep-to-mah somewhat hastily:

"My braves would not be good and ride with me; they will fight for the wicked pale-faces."

"And Velvet Bill?"

"He went up into the cliff just now. I let him in, and told him you were here."

"How many are there to fight?" asked Buffalo Bill, quietly.

"Ten braves, three white men. We have five here and Velvet Bill."

"Come!" cried Go-won-go.

Powell's hand fell upon the Red Rider.

"You have guided us here; your work is done, and you must not risk your life."

"Oh, don't mind me, surgeon—come on!" and Go-won-go sprang up that steep path before them, after passing through the channel.

And the Red Rider kept in the lead, with the others close behind.

Suddenly they came upon a scene which caused all to halt.

There stood Velvet Bill holding his brother at bay, but creeping upon him were Frank Courtney, the other white man of the Assassin band and Wep-to-mah's braves.

Just as Frank Courtney raised his weapon to shoot Velvet Bill, Go-won-go's revolver cracked and the man dropped.

With a rush the attacking force now threw themselves upon the surprised and frightened Indians, and the fight was over in a minute of time.

Then it was seen that the Assassin chief was a prisoner, and the band had been cut to pieces, for those men were merciless at what they beheld.

Valerie stood with white face looking on, while Go-won-go knelt by the side of the dying Wep-to-mah, for the brave Indian had received a number of wounds, his own braves firing upon him.

"Poor Wep-to-mah is dead! I promised to be his wife if he would betray these outlaws, though I did not, could not love him."

"But he is dead," and Go-won-go betrayed deep sorrow.

"His wife! You are then a woman! I felt that it was so," Velvet Bill said.

Then he continued:

"Now, to arrest that traitress," and he turned to find Valerie; but, driven to despair, she had glided away from the scene; there was a leap from the cliff, and she went to her death in the waters far below.

CHAPTER LXIV.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN the Assassin chief entered the fort as a prisoner, no one who saw the wonderful resemblance between the brothers wondered that he had been mistaken for Velvet Bill, while Valerie could readily pass for Alice Seeley, in her dress and hat.

The story then came out about the two brothers: that Will Dillingham—Velvet Bill—had led an honorable life, and had been sent to the frontier by a New York detective bureau to look up certain criminals in the mines, and to disguise his character the better had become a gambler.

That Surgeon Powell had done right in conniving at the escape of Velvet Bill from the fort, Colonel Seeley frankly admitted, and in his joy at having found his daughter through Go-won-go and the daring detective, he said:

"See here, Dillingham, I am half in love with that Indian beauty, and if you do not marry her, I propose."

"Thank you, Colonel Seeley, but it is already settled, as Butterfly admitted she had always cared for me, while, without knowing just why, I loved her, though believing her to be a boy."

"We are going to get married as soon as I close up my business here, and can go East to claim her."

And Velvet Bill did just as he said he would, for, three months after, he went to New York and won his wife, while he also was happy in the love of the beautiful young step-mother he had found, and who changed her name from Dillingham to Darwin.

Some weeks after the rescue of Alice, there was an execution of four men at the fort, the Three Terrors whom Comanche had brought in, and had tracked as outlaws and murderers, and Ned Wolverton, the twin brother of William Dillingham.

The Three Terrors died with mingled curses and prayers, but the Assassin chief died with calm nerve, and said simply:

"I deserve far worse, if it could be meted out to me."

In the winter there was a wedding at the fort, for Alice Seeley became Mrs. Andrew Ames, and the two best men of the young officer were Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill.

Thus falls the curtain, for Velvet Bill kept his vow, and the Red Rider had his retribution in the death of Frank Courtney, and in thus driving off the outlaws from the Fatal Trail.

THE END.

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386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 483 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.
368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.
348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.

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819 The Rival Monte Cristos.
805 The Last of the Pirates; or, Doom Driven.
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748 Arizona Charlie, the Crack-shot Detective.
704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
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672 The Red Rapier; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
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658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 Lasso King's League; or, Buck Taylor in Texas.
640 The Rover's Retribution.
635 The Ex-Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
630 The Sea Thief.
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615 The Three Buccaneers.
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
560 The Man from Mexico.
553 Mack Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
530 The Savages of the Sea.
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
516 Chatarel, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
493 The Scouts of the Sea.
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
189 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
184 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
181 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
177 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
172 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
168 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trapper.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigollets.
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109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
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85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

BY DR. NOEL DUNBAR.

- 858 Number One, the Dead-set Detective.
850 The Planter Detective.
730 Duke Despard, the Gambler Duelist.
604 The Detective in Rags; or, The Grim Shadower.
500 The True-Heart Pards.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 752 The Suspect Sport of Daisy Drift.
626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominic Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
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890 Buffalo Bill's Life-Stroke.
882 The Three Bills: Buffalo Bill Wild Bill and Band-box Bill; or, The Bravo in Broadcloth.
874 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Braves.
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857 Buffalo Bill's Royal Flush.
851 Buffalo Bill's Double Dilemma.
845 Buffalo Bill's Redskin Ruse.
830 Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue.
826 Buffalo Bill's Sharp Shooters.
822 Buffalo Bill's Best Bower.
816 Buffalo Bill's Red Trail.
812 Buffalo Bill's Death-Knell.
794 Buffalo Bill's Winning Hand.
787 Buffalo Bill's Dead Shot.
781 Buffalo Bill's Brand.
777 Buffalo Bill's Spy Shadower.
769 Buffalo Bill's Sweepstake.
765 Buffalo Bill's Dozen; or, Silk Ribbon Sam.
761 Buffalo Bill's Mascot.
757 Buffalo Bill's Double.
750 Buffalo Bill's Big Four; or, Custer's Shadow.
743 Buffalo Bill's Flush Hand.
739 Buffalo Bill's Blind; or, The Masked Driver.
735 Buffalo Bill and His Merry Men.
731 Buffalo Bill's Beagles; or, Silk Lasso Sam.
727 Buffalo Bill's Body Guard.
722 Buffalo Bill on the War-path.
716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadowers.
710 Buffalo Bill Baffled; or, The Deserter Desperado.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail; or, Mustang Madge.
687 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 Lasso King's League; or, Buck Taylor in Texas.
649 Buffalo Bill's Chief of Cowboys; or, Buck Taylor.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza; or, Silver Circle Knights.
632 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
629 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

By Buffalo Bill.

- 839 The Ranch King Dead-Shot.
830 White Beaver's Still Hunt.
807 Wild Bill, the Wild West Duelist.
800 Wild Bill, the Dead-Center Shot.
639 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pard of the Plains.
414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
52 Death-Trail, the Chief of Scouts.

By Leon Lewis, Ned Buntline, etc.

- 773 Buffalo Bill's Ban; or, Cody to the Rescue.
692 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Dared Death Dick.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail; or, The Express Rider.
153 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 883 The Man from Mexico in New York.
872 The King-Pin Shark; or, Thad Burr's Ten Strike.
861 The Tenderloin Big Four.
853 The Quaker City Crook.
844 Tracked to Chicago.
836 The Policy Broker's Blind.
829 The Frisco Sharper's Cool Hand.
821 The Tramp Shadower's Backer.
813 The Sham Spotter's Shrewd Scheme.
806 The Grand Street Gold-Dust Sharper.
798 Detective Burr's Luna's Witness.
792 The Wall Street Sharper's Snap.
784 Thad Burr's Death Drop.
742 Detective Burr Among the New York Thugs.
734 Detective Burr's Foil; or, A Woman's Strategy.
728 Detective Burr, the Headquarters Special.
713 Detective Burr's Spirit Chase.
706 Detective Burr's Seven Clues.
698 Thad Burr, the Invincible; or, The "L" Clue.
690 The Matchless Detective.
680 XX, the Fatal Claw; or, Burr's Master Case.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 914 Snowflake Sam's Double.
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873 The Sport Detective's Colorado Claw.
860 The Spangled Sport Shadower.
843 The Crescent City Sport.
832 Gid Gale's Block Game.
804 The King Pin of the Leadville Lions.
786 Chicago Charlie's Diamond Haul.
776 Chicago Charlie, the Columbian Detective.
758 The Wizard King Detective.
723 Teamster Tom, the Boomer Detective.
709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
688 River Rustlers; or, the Detective from 'Way Back.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

BY J. W. OSBON.

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877 Cool Creede, the Dead-Shot.
759 The Sport from St. Louis.
518 Royal Richard, the Thoroughbred.

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896 Kent Keen, the Crook-Crusher.
888 Nightshade in New York.
879 Falcon Flynn, the Flash Detective.
871 The Crook Cashier.
859 Clew-Hawk Keene's Right Bower.
847 Hiram Hawk, the Harlem Detective.
840 Major Bullion, Boss of the Tigers.
831 Shadowing the London Detective.
817 Plush Velvet, the Prince of Spotters.
803 The Bogus Broker's Right Bower.
788 The Night-Hawk Detective.
779 Silk Ribbon's Crush-out.
766 Detective Zach, the Broadway Spotter.
751 The Dark Lantern Detective.
736 The Never-Fail Detective.
724 Captain Hercules, the Strong Arm Detective.
711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.
701 Silver Steve, the Branded Sport.
694 Gideon Grip, the Secret Shadower.
684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.
673 The Dude Desperado.
671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.
664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hunter.
654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.
642 Red Pard and Yellow.
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
543 The Magnate Detective.
532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
505 Phil Fox, the Gentle Spotter.
496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
480 Hawk Spear, the Man with a Secret.
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
411 The California Sharp.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
352 The Desperate Dozen.
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 908 The Doomsday-Den Detective.
899 The Double-Quick Detective.
893 Yellow Gid, of Dark Divide.
885 The Expert Detective's Shake-up.
875 Trapping the Race-Track Judge.
864 The Police Special's Dilemma.
849 The Gentle Sharper's Combine.
841 Graydon's Double Deal.
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823 The Athlete Sport About Town.
808 The Crook-Detective's Pull.
790 Plunger Pete, the Race Track Detective.
783 Royal Rock, the Round-up Detective.
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764 The New York Sharp's Shadower.
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709 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
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638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
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539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
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498 Central Pacific: Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
470 The Duke of Dakota.
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
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633 The Sea Spy.
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584 Fire Feather, the Buccaneer King.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.
270 Andros, the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.
111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
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674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
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562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
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475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
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363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
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252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
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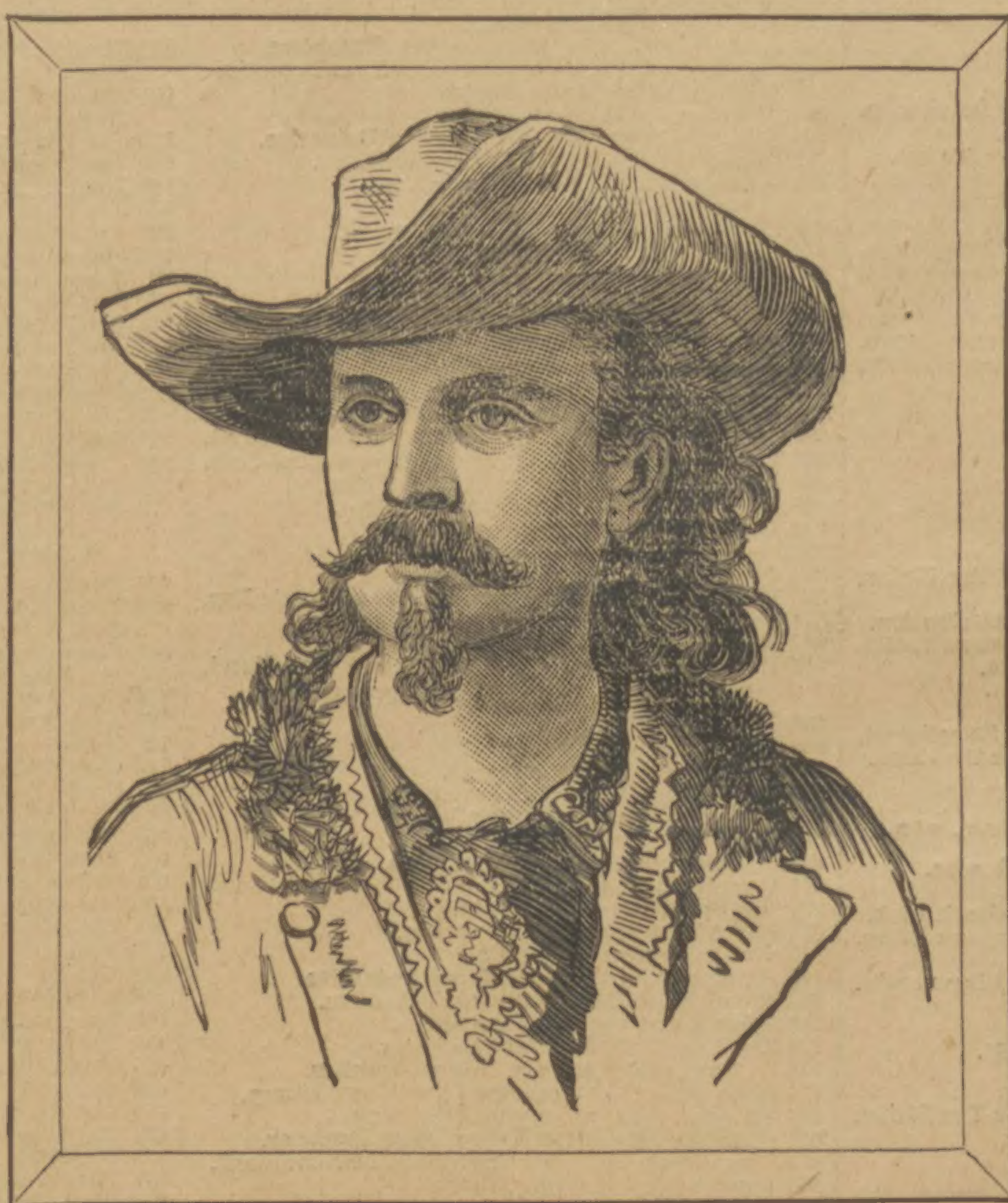
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